

VEL
NE

jeervadhara

PROCESSED

NOV 28 1994

GTU LIBRARY

FAITH - ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS

Edited by

Samuel Rayan

ISSN 0970 - 1125

Vol. XXIV No. 141

jeervadhara

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

Faith - Encounter with Jesus

**Edited by
Samuel Rayan**

Jeevadhara
Kottayam - 686 041
Kerala, India
Tel. (91) (481) 597430

JEEVADHARA

is published every month
alternately in English and Malayalam

GENERAL EDITOR

Joseph Constantine Manalel

SECTION EDITORS

The Human Problem

Felix Wilfred

C. Thomas Abraham

The Word of God

George Soares-Prabhu

Mathew Variamattom

The Living Christ

Samuel Rayan

Jose Panthackal

The People of God

Kuncheria Pathil

George Karakunnei

The Meeting of Religions

John B. Chethimattam

Thomas Manninezath

The Fulness of Life

Thomas Srampickal

Mathew Paikada

Manager: Jose Pollayil

SECTIONAL BOARD OF EDITORS

Cyril Mar Baselios

Thomas Mampra

Bosco Puthur

Cyprian illickamury

Christopher Duraisingh

George Keerankeri

EDITOR - BOOK REVIEW

J. B. Chethimattam

Editorial

CONTENTS

	Page
Editorial	164
Building Community	165
The Sign of God's Presence in India Today	
<i>M. Amaladoss</i>	
Meeting Jesus in the Struggle for a Just Society	176
<i>J. Neetilai</i>	
Tell the Prisoners that They Are Prisoners no More	192
<i>Roselyn Karakattu</i>	
"Where is He?"	198
Meeting Jesus Christ in Delhi	
<i>George Mlakuzhyil</i>	
God is Here	219
<i>Marie Mathew</i>	
Master, Where Do You Live?	223
<i>Rajendra K. Sail</i>	
Master, Where Do You Live?	235
<i>Samuel Rayan</i>	

Editorial

This issue of *Jeevadhara* carries seven testimonies of faith-encounter with Christ Jesus within our own experience and history. The reflections spring from and centre on personal involvement in the life and struggles of deprived, despised, oppressed people. The Gospel memory of Jesus' critical, subversive, transformative praxis forms the background and framework of the christological meditations.

The same questions confront all the contributors as confront us: Where is Jesus now, and what is he doing? We toil and sweat. We suffer hunger and indignity. We are enslaved and, when we resist, killed. And you, Jesus? Crucified and raised, Where do you live now? Where may we meet you, and become your Body, and offer our collaboration?

When can we say, He is here? Here I lay hold of him, and feel him holding me? Here I touch his wounds? Here people are on the cross. Is he on their cross too? Here a million crosses converge and merge, and it is always Calvary. And here people are rising, uprising, with him to new life.

I am with you till your history delivers the new growing within her. Do not be afraid of killers, Herods, Generals, Pilates and Presidents.

These meditations are political christology, liberation christology. They look for and meet Jesus in the present, in our homes and streets and factories, in slush and smoke, in the tears and hopes of women and men, in their fight for food and freedom, life and dignity. Discovering Jesus in our own history is indispensable to an understanding of who he is, and what is the structure of his consciousness. It is vital to a grasp of the mystery of the process of the Whole Christ. The Son of Man is not complete without all the sons and daughters of Woman, and all the children of Mother Earth, and the Earth.

The truth that emerges from the testimonies, from what is common to all and from the differing nuances and approaches, is that Jesus is alive and active among us; his revealing and healing work continues; his passion goes on; and his resurrection is being completed. God's Word is becoming flesh in our days too and all over the world: a flesh-becoming and passover which are no addition to the one the gospels mention, but is the same, is its extension and continuation, its historical fulfilment and realization.

Where do I live? Come and see. Come and stay. Come and share my work. Give me your hand, and touch the wounds... and you will know where I am, and what I am doing all the hours of the day and of the night, as centuries roll by.

Building Community

The Sign of God's Presence in India Today

Where are we to look for God and his Christ, and to expect to meet them? In the poor and the oppressed? In the socially excluded and despised in particular? Rather, says Amaladoss, in the process of liberating the oppressed, befriending the outcast, establishing equality and building community. Hence in the Dalit liberation movements of today. And in the Eucharist if it is a real community meal. Practice of discrimination would make the 'celebration' a lie.

The desire to encounter God seems to be common among people everywhere. Every religious tradition is full of stories of divine manifestations in particular places or persons or circumstances. The Vaishnavites speak of *avatars* (descent of the divine). The devotees of Shiva narrate his many manifestations. Every temple has a *sthalapurana* (place-legend) that recounts the story of a special divine revelation in that place. The Muslims honour the tombs of their holy people. The Christians have their saints and sanctuaries. Reports of miraculous apparitions appear periodically in the mass media. Pilgrimages to holy places seem to be on the increase. How do we discern the presence of God in these places and events? Are there some criteria? Where can we encounter God today?

Jesus in his time faced some of these same questions. Some recognized in his life and work the presence and power of God (e. g. Mk. 2:12). Others saw him as a wonder-worker (Lk. 9:9). Some said that he performed his miracles by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of the devils (Mk. 3:22). Others were skeptical and asked for special signs (Mt. 16:1-4). His own family thought that he was out of his mind (Mk. 3:21). The leaders of the people sought his death as a politically dangerous person (Jn. 11:47-53). Even his own disciples were uncertain about him till they experienced the power of his resurrection (Lk. 24:19-24). The life of Jesus is a good case study on how different people react to divine manifestations!

Where to look?

As it often happens, what we see depends on what we are looking for. This is true also of our efforts to encounter God. The possibility of encounter depends on what our idea of God is and where we hope to find God. At the time of Jesus, the common people were looking for a political Messiah who would come in power to liberate them from the oppression of foreign powers and their local collaborators. The leaders of the people would have been comfortable with some one who strengthened their own power base. Some like the pharisees and the people of the Qumran community would have preferred an ascetical Rabbi who promoted a more strict observance of the law. Only a few like Mary and Simeon were open to any manifestation of the divine.

In this situation, much of the effort of Jesus went into educating the people about what to look for in searching for God. He discouraged people from looking for signs and wonders (Mk. 8:12). He demonstrated, by healing a man with a withered hand on the sabbath, that concern for people and their needs was more important than the rigid observance of the law (Mk. 3:1-5). He sought out the company of the poor and the publicans rather than the fellowship of the rich and the powerful (Mt. 9:10-13). He emphasized humility and service, instead of searching for honour and power (Lk. 22:24-27; Jn. 13:12-15). Jesus is offering some values, counter to what is current in human society, that may serve as criteria for discerning God's presence. Let us explore this a little further, by looking at the life and teaching of Jesus.

The discourse of Jesus about the Last Judgement is well known (Mt. 25:31-46). He makes it clear that feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, clothing the naked and visiting those in prison are concrete ways of meeting him — the Lord: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40). Here Jesus identifies himself with the poor, the suffering and the marginalized. This perspective has helped generations of Christians to seek to encounter Christ in the poor and the oppressed of the world.

A slightly different perspective seems to be offered in the discourse of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk. 4:16-21).

Jesus feels sent — and his followers feel that they are sent after him — to bring the good news to the poor, to release the captives to give sight to the blind and to liberate the oppressed. Jesus is here the one who brings help and liberation.

We see a similar perspective in the story of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). The focus here is not so much on the person who is wounded as on the person who offers help and the others who did not. It is the Samaritan who is being a good neighbour to the person in need. Christian tradition has always seen Jesus in the good Samaritan, and not in the wounded traveller.

We have still another perspective in the story of Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10). He receives Jesus in his house. The presence of Jesus brings about a transformation in him and he declares: "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Lk. 19:8). The presence of Jesus is experienced precisely in the transformation that is taking place in the heart and behaviour of Zacchaeus. The transformation leads to new relationships that substitute justice, sharing and fellowship for exploitation and domination.

Taking the different stories together and reflecting on them, I think that the presence of God can be experienced, not in particular persons or places or events, but in *actions* that bring about *relationships* of justice, love, fellowship and community. *God is present and active where community among the humans is being built up.*

Now we can see the significance of the symbolic action that Jesus chose to perpetuate his presence in the community, namely the Eucharist. It is not just the distribution of bread among the poor and the needy, though it implies that. It is breaking bread together, that is eating and drinking together as an expression of having and sharing everything in common and of living together (Acts 2:44-46). The symbolic action of the Eucharist is not primarily about sharing, but about fellowship in community, which of course involves sharing. Jesus becomes present at the moment when people come together, transcending all that divides them, and live their fellowship in sharing a meal. In every culture eating together is a symbol of acceptance and fellowship, equality and community. But it remains an

empty symbol if it is not the celebration of actual coming together as a fellowship of love and service.

The Practice of Jesus : Equality and Community

The implications of building community among people become clearer if we look at the practice of Jesus. The obstacles to community among the humans are many. The temptation is to focus on one or other of these obstacles according to a particular ideology or point of view. A look at the life of Jesus points to values that seem more or less central to community. Oppressions and inequalities are of many kinds: economic, political and social. They are inter-related, so that one can talk about cumulative inequality. Some one who is poor is also politically powerless and socially marginalized. But I think that the practice of Jesus shows that social discrimination is particularly detrimental to community. When another person is considered socially inferior, that person's dignity is diminished. In extreme cases the diminished other becomes a non-person. The person's worth as the image and child of God is denied. That person is an outcast. Relationship to that person cannot be real love and fellowship. Community in such a situation is not possible. There is an adage which says that love finds or makes equals. Where equality is not possible, there is a onesided relationship of paternalism or condescension and, on the other hand, of dependence. Equality is not detrimental to diversity of roles or gifts, but to their gradation in a scale of superiority-inferiority.

Jesus in his life and ministry befriends particularly the outcasts of society. The Galileans were considered by the people of Judea, not only as poor, but as ignorant and immoral, without respect for the law (Cf. Jn 1:46). Jesus did much of his ministry among the Galileans. His disciples were Galileans. Jesus was accused of associating with publicans and sinners (Lk 5:30). Many of them may have been financially well off. But they were outcasts. The Jews would not share food or drink with the Samaritans, because they were considered outcasts. The Samaritan woman was surprised that Jesus asked her for water. The disciples were astonished that he was talking to her (Jn 4:7-30). Jesus also picks up a Samaritan to illustrate

his point about loving the neighbour and compares him favourably with a priest and a levite (Lk 10:33-37). To illustrate the reversal of roles Jesus narrates the story of Lazarus outside the gate now exalted to the bosom of Abraham (Lk 16:19-31). Jesus heals lepers, who were cast away from social intercourse, and integrates them in the community (Lk 17:14). Jesus forgives adulterous women who should have been cast out and stoned to death, and restores them to society (Jn 8:11; Lk 7:36-50). Comparing the pharisee and the publican in prayer, he commends the humility of the publican (Lk 18:9-14). He not only exhorts his disciples to humble service to one another, but shows an example by washing [the feet of his disciples (Jn 13:3-15).

We should not misunderstand the option of Jesus for the outcast. The intention of Jesus is not to glorify somehow their status as outcasts. On the contrary by treating them as social equals he is affirming their inherent dignity as human beings and as children of God; he is condemning the flimsy reasons and the unjust structures by which the dominant groups make them outcast; he is showing that the outcast are much more open to receive the good news than the self-righteous who give themselves superior airs; by 'going down' to their current level in society he is actually bringing them up to his own level; he declares that they are specially loved by his Father, a love that ennobles them and makes them heirs to the Reign of God. True community of the children of God is possible only when the barriers of human-made inequalities are broken down.

Jesus does this in a two-fold way. On the one hand, he ridicules people who are self-righteous; who seek the best places in banquets; who pray and fast in order to be seen by others; who promote the mechanical observance of law as a means of discriminating between people; who set up purity-impurity taboos to marginalize people. On the other hand, he lives and promotes social equality by practising table fellowship with publicans and sinners; by curing people of their diseases which are causes for their marginalization; by befriending and freeing women from their social oppressions. His favourite image for the Reign of God is the banquet and it is the poor and the outcasts that find their way to it (Mt 22:1-10).

St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* shows that he has grasped the thrust of the good news of Jesus. He speaks of the strategies of Satan and of Christ. Satan leads people progressively to love of riches and honours and to pride. Christ on the contrary leads people to poverty, love for humiliation and humility. The progression is interesting. A person who is proud is self-centred. One exalts oneself above others, considering them inferior in some way. Riches and honours help to create an outward image of such superiority. The others are treated as objects, to be exploited for one's own feeling of self importance. The others are not respected as full human beings. The amassing of riches is often not a search for pleasures that riches can buy, but for power and status. On the contrary, humility is not the affirmation of one's lack of worth, but rather respecting the other and readiness to give, serve and love. It is as if one is bending over backwards to recognize the other as equal in dignity to oneself.

I think therefore that the good news of Jesus is the restoration of the dignity of every human person as some one loved by God, the abolition of every type of inequality, but especially of social discrimination and the building up of a community of fellowship, love and service where each one is ready to give one's own life for the other (Jn 15:12-13). This good news is symbolized in the practice of the table fellowship.

Dalits, Castes and Community

Where is Jesus present in India today? Where is his good news relevant? Where is it challenging us to change and to be creative? Where can we discern his spirit and force quietly active promoting change? I think that putting together the conclusions of the two preceding sections one can say that Jesus can be encountered today where authentic human communities are being built up. In India today one special process in which Jesus becomes manifest is the movement for the liberation of the Dalits (= the oppressed) from the social discrimination to which they are subject and their integration as equals in the human community. This is the good news not only to the Dalits, but to every one, because such new human communities involve and demand the collaboration of every one.

The situation of the Dalits is too well known to need elaborate presentation. The Dalits constitute nearly 15% of the population. Economically they are among the poorest. If they are not engaged in doing the menial jobs in the community, they are working, as agricultural labourers, often landless, almost reduced to practical slavery through debt and/or bonded labour. Politically they are powerless. At the local level they are dominated by land lords. Though they may have the power of the vote and reserved seats in representative bodies, they do not really have the economic and social base to wield this power effectively unless other groups collaborate with them. Even where such collaboration is possible they will be the junior partners. Socially they are outcasts, outside and at the bottom of a hierarchically organized community. This exclusion and hierarchy are legitimated by a religious ideology of purity-pollution. This whole social structure is taken for granted and interiorized, not only by the dominant groups, but also often by the Dalits themselves, so that it becomes an element of the cultural structures too, finding expression in stories and proverbs. The Dalits are thus oppressed by cumulative inequalities, economically, politically, religiously, socially and culturally.

I think that the key elements of this oppressive structure are the social ones of exclusion and hierarchy, though they find expression in the field of economics and politics and are legitimated culturally and religiously. The principles of such social oppression cannot be fully understood except in the context of the caste system. Social oppression is not peculiar to India. It has other forms like racism, nationalism, fascism and religious or cultural fundamentalism; and these can be found in all parts of the globe. The principle of exclusion is the reverse of social solidarity as manifested in kinship or tribal or other similar groups. A group's separateness is maintained by the refusal to inter-dine and inter-marry with other groups.

In the caste system exclusion is subservient to and strengthens hierarchy. A recent survey has counted about 4,000 caste groups in India. These castes are organized in a hierarchical system and the framework is provided by the *varna* system. Society is divided hierarchically into four groups: the Brahmins who are priests and intellectuals, the Kshatriyas who are rulers and warriors, the Vaisyas who are traders, the

Shudras who are servants and workers. The Dalits are outside the system, below the Shudras. The principle of hierarchy is difference in social status. This status is determined by birth. In order to be effective, this difference has to be accepted, at least in practice, by every one.

It is evident that this is an unequal, unjust social system. The other is not accepted as of equal dignity as a human person, but is assigned a rank in the social order in terms of the caste that person is born into. There is no mutuality in respect, fellowship, love and service. There is no community.

In this situation, the good news of Jesus demands the abolition of social discrimination and the building up of community. Though the Dalits are not the only oppressed people in this system, they, as the most oppressed, provide a touchstone of every authentic reform and improvement. What does this demand of Jesus imply? We need to develop a vision of community in which all human beings are equal. We have to make the oppressed as well as the oppressors share and interiorize this vision. We have to create the economic and political conditions that make the building up of such a community possible. We have to purify the religions and cultures from elements that justify discriminations. We need to liberate the oppressed from their complex of inferiority and the oppressors from their assumptions of superiority. This is done effectively by promoting relationships of equality and fellowship in life and work in the context of building up a human community.

Dalit Liberation Movements

Looking at India today one can see signs of new movement in this area. The Constitution has formally abolished untouchability and established a democratic political framework. It has also made provision for affirmative action in the field of education, employment and political representation. But only the people can bring about religio-cultural changes and build community. A brief look at some of the reform movements in recent times may help us grasp more clearly the challenges before us.

Shri Narayana Guru worked for the uplift of the Ezhava community in Keralam. The community has come up economically and politically. He also developed a religious ideology to support

the social promotion. He laid claims to the higher Gods of Hinduism to whom he dedicated temples. He used the doctrine of the *advaita* (nonduality) to show that all people are equal. *E. V. Ramasamy*, popularly known as 'Periyar' in Tamil Nadu, animated an anti-brahmin movement. The affirmation of one's own dignity as a human being was one of the planks of his programme to promote self-respect. He attacked brahmanic Hinduism as the legitimation of the oppressive caste system and encouraged inter-caste marriages. *Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar* also promoted education for the Mahars. But his struggle was focused on securing political rights for the Dalits in the form of reserved seats in the legislatures. He also tried to escape the religious legitimations of caste oppression by leading his followers into Buddhism. *Mahatma Gandhi* fought against untouchability and promoted inter-dining and inter-caste marriage. Though his use of the term *Harijan* (people of God) to refer to the Dalits has been taken as paternalistic by some, I think that it was an effort to affirm the inherent dignity of the Dalits as children of God. In recent years we have the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement. The Dalits became Christians hoping to escape the religious stigma of impurity ascribed to them in brahmanic Hinduism. But they are discovering now that their social status in society as well as in the Church has not changed at all.

I think that in all these movements one has not sufficiently and successfully attacked the caste system as such as a hierarchical ordering of society by status determined at birth. Economical and political uplift is necessary, perhaps essential, conditions, especially for those who are at the bottom of the scale. Religious reform is also indispensable. We should also help the oppressed to discover and affirm their personal, human dignity. But real equality will come only when social discrimination based on differentiation of status is attacked and abolished. This will not be achieved merely in a negative way, by preaching against it, but positively by building human communities of fellowship and love.

Today one talks much about human rights. But they tend to be interpreted individualistically. They promote liberty of speech and action for individuals. They defend the right of each one to be left alone. They do not speak of social responsibility in a positive way, nor of relationships and community.

The table fellowship of Jesus

It is here that the praxis of Jesus, especially his table fellowship, offers us a concrete manner of proceeding in the task of fighting against discrimination and in promoting community. It is also significant for us that Jesus has institutionalized it in the Eucharist. But is the celebration of the Eucharist helping in any way at all in building community in the context of caste discrimination, particularly against the Dalits?

The Eucharist is a symbolic action in which a community expresses its fellowship, mutual love and service in the sharing of a common meal eaten in memory of Jesus. He is present as the bond of communion by becoming the food that is shared. But unfortunately we have made the Eucharist an empty ritual. The 'real' presence of Christ seems limited, at least in public awareness, to the materials that are eaten and drunk. Instead of building community the celebration seems to strengthen discriminations based on caste, sex, Rite etc. If it is not socially significant during the celebration, it has even less impact in the social life of the community.

The discriminations of the caste system are challenging us to rediscover the meaning of the Eucharist in our communities. First of all, if the Eucharist is to be meaningful, it must celebrate the actual efforts that we are making every day to overcome discrimination, to discover each other as brothers and sisters, to live a life of mutual love and service, to build community. If such praxis does not precede and follow the Eucharist, it will only be an empty, meaningless ritual. We will be falsifying the symbol by our life, celebrating a lie. We can paraphrase John and say that if we say that we are celebrating the Eucharist, but are practising caste discrimination, particularly against the Dalits, then we are liars and the truth of God is not in us. We are eating the Lord's body and drinking his blood for our own condemnation.

Secondly, the true meaning of the Eucharist can be lived more powerfully, if we can celebrate it as a real meal shared in community. Then its social significance will be highlighted and experienced. Unfortunately we have ritualized and sacralized it. Focussing on the real presence in the bread and the wine, we have ignored the Lord's real presence in the community, which it is supposed to express and foster. By idealizing it as

Christ's sacrifice, we have ignored its demands on us to sacrifice our own self-centred and exploitative sense of superiority.

A meaningful celebration of the Eucharist will naturally lead to the wider practice of inter-dining in the community. Such practice can enable the Christian community to be a prophetic presence in the wider Indian community and also promote inter-dining as a symbol of ending social discrimination against the Dalits and establishing equality of status and fellowship.

A corresponding, perhaps more difficult, project is the promotion of inter-caste marriages. All recent social reformers have suggested this, though it has never become a national social movement. We speak of marriage as a mystery of the community (Church) and of Christ. This means that the spouses discover each other as the symbol of Christ and their union with each other becomes a symbol of their union with Christ present in their relationship. Here again we see the acceptance of the other as a partner, as an equal in the context of a loving and serving fellowship, and not as an object to be used or an inferior to be dominated and exploited.

Conclusion

Speaking of the option for the poor and the oppressed one might tend to identify Christ with the oppressed. But if Christ is with the oppressed, it is a prophetic presence that challenges every one to their self-liberation from that oppression. I prefer to discern the presence of Christ in the very creative process through which the poor are being liberated from their oppressions. It is the transforming presence of the risen Christ. During his public life, the transforming power of Christ seems to have been particularly active in challenging social discrimination and in promoting a community of love and service. This dimension of the ministry of Christ is specially relevant to India today where the caste system, seen at its worst in the experience of the outcast Dalits, is the greatest evil that hinders the growth of authentic community. That seems the appropriate place to encounter the transforming presence and power of Christ today.

5 Borgo S. Spirito
C. P. 6139
00195 Rome, Italy

M. Amaladoss

Meeting Jesus in the Struggle for a Just Society

From a life of piety in an institutional set-up, Nitilal moved to involvement with people. This has had two facets: one, an experiment in simple community living, where sharing was central; and two, participation in peasant struggles against landlordism, which landed him in prison for a few days. It is in these commitments that he has been meeting the living Christ.

I spent about 10 years, living in the midst of the people of Hunterganj and Chatra in Chotanagpur in Bihar. I have been working with and for the poor and the exploited of the area. My life has been a continuous struggle for the realisation of a just and human society. Recently Samuel Rayan put me a question, "Could you say where during these long years of struggles, you met Jesus?" The following are my reflections in response to this question.

1. My spiritual background

During my period of formation in my Religious Congregation until the last year of my theology studies I cherished a type of devotional spirituality. I had special devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Immaculate Heart of Mary and to St. Joseph, my patron saint. I was committed to a mission theology which emphasised church extension, conversion and baptism. To spend myself fully to bring people to Christ has been my main concern. Total self-denial in order to be totally available to people has been my spiritual ideal. I felt to have met Jesus in prayer and in services to the poor and rejected. I made regular visits to the slums once a week with the Sisters of Charity and more often with a Brother of Charity, a close friend and co-student of theology in the Papal Seminary, Pune.

During the fourth year of my theology studies in Pune, I began to call in question our missionary approach and the relevance of the priesthood in its present shape. In relation to

missionary approach and its supporting spirituality my basic attitude has been: God can't be partial. He has revealed Himself to me in Jesus. He will guide the non-Christians in His own way. I need not be over-anxious about their salvation. As for the priesthood I felt that priests form a class of their own. They have as a rule been busy with sacraments and church affairs, keeping themselves away from the ordinary people, making no impact on the society for any qualitative change and making no substantial contribution towards an integral growth of the nation. I seriously doubted whether I should be one among them. I went through an inner struggle. I felt to have met Jesus in prayer telling me that merely to add to the number of priests and to do the type of work they commonly did at that time (1970) I need not get ordained.

I tried to clarify my doubts in consultation with many people. Here the role that Fr. Neuner SJ played cannot be forgotten. He placed before me a relevant and satisfactory image of priesthood. He convinced me that it is not enough for a priest to be a cult-functionary in the church. We need different types of spiritual leaders in the Church. Be a prophet as Jesus was. Be a reconciler in this world of divisions. That was his advice.

With a new image of the priest I decided to get ordained in order to be "a reconciler".

My understanding and experience of faith underwent a change. I viewed faith as an act of surrender to God who reveals Himself in manifold ways. Faith-surrender consisted in commitment to God's people and to their cause. The dogmatic content of faith has not been absolute for me. I felt that the faith-content gets relativised in the context of religious pluralism. I discovered remarkable unanimity among followers of different faiths concerning the nature of faith in terms of personal relationship, surrender and commitment to God. As for the content of faith I found diversity of opinions, contradictory theories and irreconcilable dogmas in our country.

With this frame of mind I began my doctorate studies in theology at Innsbruck University. The period of 1973-77 was for me a time of serious inquiries on revelation in the world religions, on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the significance of Jesus Christ in the context of religious pluralism

in India. It was not merely an intellectual inquiry but a personal search for relevance in my mission as a follower of Jesus Christ and as a religious priest in India.

My studies deepened my faith in Jesus Christ. Because of my personal relationship and faith in him, Jesus is unique for me. There is a profound sense of gratitude within me for having been able to meet God through Jesus Christ. I realise that outside this faith-relationship His uniqueness can in no way be proved. Jesus is unique only for the person who believes in Him. He cannot be unique for others to whom God has chosen to reveal Himself in other ways. Religions are partners in dialogue for the realisation of God's Reign over the human society. They have a common task. Each one of them is unique. They do not stand apart but are related to one another. All of them are at the service of people and society. No religion can be allowed to destroy another. They need to help one another in building up our nation. Jesus Christ is uniquely significant in our context of many religions in bringing people together in mutual service, in revealing God's love and Fatherhood to all. God's Reign, the content of Jesus' message is the ultimate goal of man's mission on earth, and the common task of all religions, though they understand it differently. It means creation of a world where the humans recognise the Absolute to whom they surrender themselves and at the same time relate among themselves in mutual respect, equality and fellowship, and foster together a just societal order. The Church is not the sole organisation with this mission. The Church is only one of many faith-movements, which has to march along with other religions/faith movements for the realisation of God's Reign which is understood and experienced differently by different people.

These faith-convictions of mine I shared with my co-religious in my missionary congregation on my return after my studies in 1978. I proposed a different type of mission work, not one that is aimed at conversion in the sense of leaving one's non-christian religion to accept Christianity. I proposed a mission where conversion to God is to be realised with a qualitative change in life. Bringing about an external change of one's religion is not important. Working together with people of other religions for God's Reign and a societal change in

favour of the poor and the exploited is definitely a mission that is demanded of the Indian context.

I continued for about four years to communicate these convictions to different people in different ways. My co-religious listened to them with great suspicion. Some of them considered me a heretic who had lost faith in Jesus Christ. My superiors thought I could emerge as a threat to the missionary congregation. For, the very purpose of the Congregation's existence would disappear, if change of religion is not a necessity.

I realised that I simply lacked credibility: I have been talking about my faith-convictions which were not tested against concrete experience in the field. Therefore in order to concretely realise my faith-convictions and thereby to be relevant and credible, I decided to move out of the institutions and go closer to people. In the beginning of 1983 I started working with and for the underprivileged people at the grassroots in the interior rural areas of Hunterganj and Chatra blocks in Bihar.

2. Jesus in Hunterganj community

In 1983 I formed a small community in Hunterganj under the name of 'Jan Jagruti Ashram'. It was a community of people belonging to different religions, castes and status of life. It consisted of 4 to 6 members at a time. The members were not always the same. When some discontinued, others joined. I feel, the best and longest period of community life and work we experienced together in Hunterganj was the time when Mahendre Singh, a Bihari Rajput youth, Kailash Prasad, a Bihari Harijan, Biswas Bhai, a carpenter-priest belonging to the Fraternity of the Little Brothers of the Gospel (Charles de Foucaud), Lily and Bimala, two sisters of ICM Congregation, Seema, an Adivasi girl and myself belonging to the Indian Missionary Society lived in a village at the road side amidst the poor and shared their life-style. It was an inter-religious group, a community of Hindus and Christians. In this core-team there were both married and unmarried members, religious men and women. Through a team-spirit, common work and prayer the members tried to live out a community, based on equality, freedom and fellowship.

We had a simple life-style. We limited our expenses with a commonly managed budget of Rs. 350/- per person per month.

People felt at home in our Ashram, precisely because our life style was not different from those who lived around us. We lived so close to the Gaya-Chatra road that we had a life exposed to the public. We lived in an open house/Ashram with neither security nor privacy. People knew what we did, ate, drank and talked. Such an atmosphere and life style won us credibility before the public. The presence of the local Hindi-speaking non-Christian members in community helped us come out of the ghetto which we usually find in the conventional mission stations. Our language, life-style and prayer emerged from the local situation of the rural people, so much so that the local people could join us in our meals and prayers with no feeling of any alienation, exclusion or discrimination.

We prayed together as a community to our common Father. We did not experience our religious difference as divisive. In our morning prayer we listened to the Word of God from the Bible, Gita, Koran and other Holy Scriptures. We took inspiration not only from Jesus but also from the lives and works of Mahatma Gandhi, and other Indian national and religious leaders. We constantly reflected on our actual lives and actions to see whether they matched with theirs. Our life in community consisted of action, reflection and action. Our daily activities were evaluated in the evening. We planned together all our programmes. Through this process of common reflection on our lives and activities in the actual situation on the one hand and the readings from the sacred scriptures and from the lives of our great leaders on the other, we could draw insights for further action. This is how our community spirituality took concrete shape. It helped us grow in team-spirit. We experienced single-mindedness and a common vision in our approach to people, and in the execution of our plans.

In this particular type of community life at Hunterganj how did I meet Jesus?

The force that motivated and inspired me to start and continue to live this particular type of community life has been definitely and primarily the life, message and person of Jesus Christ, though I also drew inspirations from others. Amidst hardships and inconveniences of a primitive type of life and amidst manifold struggles that resulted from the nature of our

involvement, I have been experiencing a sense of joy, fulfilment and mutual support, equality and fellowship in the community — an experience of being brothers and sisters to one another in our struggles.

Our community had been fortunate enough to be closely guided and spiritually motivated by Bishop George Saupin of happy memory during our first 3 years in Hunterganj, when he was the Bishop of Daltonganj. He occasionally came and stayed with us in our house Ashram, inspired us, prayed with us and celebrated Eucharist in our community. As mentioned above, our community prayer in Hunterganj gave us an inter-religious experience. The members belonging to different religions sang inspiring bhajans, listened both Christian and Hindu scriptures and prayed together, bringing in the aspirations and struggles of the people we have experienced on the previous day. The non-christian members of the community had the option to join or not in the Eucharistic celebration, the strictly christian worship. But Mahendre Singh, who in the light of his experiences of struggle had been in the habit of making valuable reflections in our common prayer sessions, regularly took part in the Eucharistic celebrations too. I used to give him communion believing that Jesus present in the community could only strengthen our 'communion' among ourselves through our sharing in his sacrament of love. It is unthinkable for me that the Eucharist could in any way become a source of division. We ate together and prayed together, we shared the same life-struggles with other community members and the people around. Excluding Mahendre from communion would mean for me division and lack of faith in the presence of Jesus, who alone could judge the nature of faith which Mahendre had in receiving communion. Sharing communion with him were moments when I experienced Jesus as the Great Reconciler and Unifier.

But this faith-perception of mine has not been shared by my co-religious in my congregation. One of my co-religious who visited our Ashram and witnessed me giving communion to Mahendre made it a big issue in the congregation. There was a hue and cry. Meanwhile we had an opportunity to celebrate Eucharist in the community with Bishop Saupin. In his presence I gave communion to Mahendre and after the Mass

asked him specifically how he perceived my act of giving communion to a non-christian. After a few moments of reflection he told us that it might give some kind of scandal in a large traditional parish community but here in the context of the experience of an emerging spirituality in communion with the believers of other religions, there shouldn't be any problem. The objection of my co-religious did not disturb me. I enjoyed an inner peace with a firm conviction and the experience of Jesus' presence in our community.

3. Jesus in our Struggles

a) Our identity and involvement with people

We the members of our Ashram community, involved ourselves as a team in building village communities (Lok Samitis). We have been primarily known to the surrounding people as a group working for the Lok Samiti. Lok Samiti is a people's movement that took its origin from Jai Prakash Narain. We went about in the villages introducing ourselves to the villagers as people belonging to Lok Samiti. In our contacts we preferred the poor, the underprivileged and the victims of injustice. We spent time with them in their homes and villages. We made their problems ours. Their bitter experiences of all sorts, their struggles with the powerful and their aspirations were taken up for common reflection with them. On the basis of their common issues, people of different villages were brought together. We helped them to analyse their social problems, providing them with informations and knowledge. Soon they realised that the problems of injustices and inequalities could not be solved without getting themselves organised and united. People formed themselves into Lok Samitis at the grass root level of villages and panchayats, and linked themselves to the Lok Samitis that have been already in existence in the neighbouring blocks and districts. From their own experience and from their interaction with us and with the activists in the other districts they came to realise that the very purpose of Lok Samiti is for the realisation of Jai Prakash Narain's well known concept and programme of "total revolution".

Regular village meetings on issues and problems were instrumental in effecting people's growth in group education, social awareness and collective power. With two years of involvement

and hard work, our team of activists from the Ashram was able to make an impact on the whole of Hunterganj block. Our organisation grew and won the confidence of the common people.

Our objectives and options were clear. We identified the bonded labourers in many villages and took steps for their rehabilitation. We stood with the landless for getting their lands restored by those who had forcibly dispossessed them. Better equipped with knowledge, our villagers refused to give bribes to the block *karmacharis* (officials) for getting their land documents rectified. Collective power of the people forced some of the Block staff members to return the bribes they took. Due to our organised struggle against corruption a Block Development Officer and two of his staff members were dismissed; one Circle Officer of the Revenue department and a Ranger of Forest department were transferred.

We settled quarrels of the villagers through the medium of village meetings without having recourse to police or court. As a result police lost their illegal income. Atrocities and crimes against the Harijans, women and other weaker sections of society were brought to our notice. We reached the place, made on-the-spot enquiries, contacted police and other authorities, followed up the cases and sought ways of doing justice.

People were mobilised against the atrocities, injustice, discrimination and inaction of the authorities concerned. They were instructed on J. P.'s message: "government officials are not masters, but servants of the people in a democracy." Accordingly village leaders kept watch on erring school masters, corrupt *karmacharis* and their feudalistic panchayat representatives.

Meetings at various levels, seminars, conventions, study circles, demonstrations at the block, district and state levels, dharna and relay fasts on local and national issues were, for the people, means of mass education as well as of building power. The people participated in the public affairs of the block and became alert to the issues affecting the common people anywhere in the state. They believed in the moral power and numerical strength of people's organisations and used non-violent and peaceful democratic means to secure their rights, taking inspiration mainly from Mahatma Gandhi and Jai Prakash Narain.

As the Lok Samiti increasingly exercised greater impact on society, people experienced its power. It empowered them. Their increasing participation in the local public affairs through the Lok Samiti gave them a sense of importance. Democracy meant for them something meaningful. We, the members of the Ashram community, emerged as animators of these local samitis and link persons in relation to macro-level organisations of Lok Samiti. People considered us as men and women who made life-long commitments to the ideology of "total revolution". Lok Samiti has been our identity. This identity of ours and our life-style in identification with the common people and our involvement with and for them made us very much acceptable to the common people.

b) Our struggles against hostile forces

What is said above is a one-sided and positive aspect of what has been going on in the Lok Samiti of Hunterganj. While common people welcomed us, people of vested interests opposed us. None of the above-mentioned achievements could be realised without going through struggles from within and without. We had to go through experiences of tension and terror, and face challenges and risks which threatened our very existence. From the very inception of our life and involvement in Hunterganj we faced constantly and continuously hostilities from vested interests of one group or another.

Seeing our association with the dalits and people of lower strata, the higher caste people of our neighbouring village, Sohad, labelled us as naxalites. The Rajputs of Nagar village burned down the huts of their bonded labourers in retaliation for the support we rendered to them. In collusion with a local MLA they resolved to set fire to our Ashram-hut in order to chase us away from Hunterganj. A rich farmer of Paini, a village 15 km away from Hunterganj, threatened to liquidate us if we continued to help his labourers, who were paid only a pittance, far below the stipulated minimum wage.

Although the local administration on the whole supported us, we had to face a very difficult situation due to a corrupt Block Development Officer. Under a special rural development programme 40 wells were granted to Dalits, which were fully subsidised by the Government. On an average a sum of Rs. 14500/-

was sanctioned for a well, which the beneficiaries would get in instalments. But the Dalit beneficiaries had a hard time even to get the first instalment after the completion of the work demanded by the Programme: Some of them even took loans from the local money lenders on heavy interest and did the work with the hope of paying back when they got the money from the government. There were many irregularities in the implementation of the scheme. Heavy bribe, harassment of the beneficiaries, unnecessary delay in the implementation which proved fatal to the beneficiaries, embezzlement of the fund by the block staff etc. became part of the scheme.

Lok Samiti volunteers made a survey of these wells all over the district. When we began our survey in Hunterganj, the local block authorities and some of the politicians and goondas who seemed to have a share in the loot from the poor, got annoyed. They threatened the Dalits with dire consequences if they revealed the truth either to our volunteers or to anybody who comes for an investigation. We submitted our survey report to the Commissioner Shri. K. B. Saxena, who was a terror in the entire commissary because of his well-known anti-corruption moves.

When an investigation party from the district headquarters reached Hunterganj the block development officer and his staff were in panic. They sent their agents to all the beneficiaries to instruct them not to reveal the truth. But the poor people were not to be fooled any more. The Lok Samiti volunteers were able to instill in them courage and hope. As a result the whole story came out in public. In spite of all the attempts to hide the irregularities, the B. D. O. and two of his staff members were found guilty. They were suspended. This incident created a lot of tension in the locality between the corrupt officials and their agents on the one side and the Lok Samiti members who stood for the truth on the other side. The local politician-goondas in support of the B. D. O. twice surrounded me in the market place and demanded that I give up pursuing the case against the B. D. O. Under their pressure and threat some of the beneficiaries withdrew their complaints.

In 1987 we faced a more serious challenge in our struggle on behalf of the exploited farmers of Khutikewal village in

Hunterganj block. These farmers have continued to be dominated by landlords even after forty years of independence from foreign rule and the abolition of the Zamindari system. On the 5th of September 1987, they, encouraged and strengthened by Lok Samiti activists, showed their united resistance to the brutalities and high-handedness of their ex-landlord Kamata Prasad. About 40 henchmen of this landlord, equipped with firearms and other lethal weapons began to plough the villagers' land as in previous years. The farmers, unarmed and helpless, led by the Lok Samiti, got into the field and squatted in front of the ploughing tractor. In that process we were criminally assaulted and beaten up.

This was followed by two months of campaigns, protest meetings, demonstrations and other peaceful and legitimate ways of agitation both at the local and the district levels to highlight the atrocities perpetrated by the landlord. The action resulted in ending Kamata Prasad's illegal landlordism over the village. The villagers could now take peaceful possession and cultivation, of their lands. They gave a plot of land to the Lok Samiti activists too, who at present have their Ashram and centre there in Khutikewal village.

In the course of our intensive campaign there were many incidents which created tensions in us and among our people. In collusion with the landlord's men the local police harassed our people. In the night of 25th September 1987 the Zamindar's men attacked our people for the second time. Five villagers were seriously wounded. The police took no action, the Block physician, influenced by the Zamindar's men, was criminally negligent. There were frightening rumours and repeated threats in the villages about further possible attacks. Our Ashram hut, situated on the road side with no security of any kind, was not spared. Unidentified musclemen came on motor cycles and torched us late at night. Plans to kidnap one of our sisters were brought to our attention. The Policemen given to us as guards could not be trusted. The superintendent of Police from Gaya requested me not to travel alone nor to pass through Chatra-crossing at Dhobi on the F. T. road, where criminals usually assembled. In spite of all these we continued to stay in the Ashram hut, though in total insecurity, risking our lives.

Our struggle with the ex-landlord and his men was a cause of tension in the entire block. The Hunterganj society got divided on this issue. The landless and small farmers stood with us. The powerful class, comprising landlords and forward caste people looked hostile and tensed up in relating to us. This was keenly felt in the market place and shopping centre of Hunterganj. The left parties supported us. The congress leaders felt humiliated as we did tackle the problem of Kamata Prasad's illegal landlordism which they did not and could not for more than 35 years. The government authorities on the whole, except a few local persons, supported us. For it was nothing but an implementation of law and government policy.

Then came my greatest experience of struggle in the course of which I was imprisoned for 13 days and then released unconditionally. It was a struggle against a landlord-criminal-combine. (For details see my article in *Vidyajyoti*, Feb. 1993 titled "Struggles in the struggle for a Just Society").

In November 1991 Moti Mahato of village Jori, one of the local leaders of Lok Samiti, was killed by criminals hired by an ex-Zamindar, Bhupender Singh of Jori. It was a step in an effort to suppress the people's movement of Lok Samiti. For under the leadership of Lok Samiti activists from Hunterganj and local men like Moti Mahato from Jori, people of 16 villages — about 1500 families — have been waking up and organising themselves into Lok Samiti. Bhupendre Singh had been claiming illegally the land which has been in the cultivating possession of the villagers. He took away forcibly on gun-point half of their produce every year. Those who protested in the past were allegedly either liquidated or ill-treated. Moti Mahato's murder was intended to frighten the people and to prevent any move against the ex-landlord. This time events took a different turn due to the organisation and collective power of the people. Moti Mahato's murder was followed by intensive campaigns of the villagers to free themselves from the landlord. Hectic programmes of demonstrations, public meetings, delegations to the higher authorities, wall-writings, press releases, *dharnas*, relay fasts etc. were organised in Jori by the Hunterganj Lok Samiti leaders to have the murderers brought to book. The Zamindar-criminal-police combine was keen on suppressing the movement to shelter the culprits and to serve the Zamindar's interests.

Being a practising lawyer in Chatra at that time I was not directly involved in the movement which was fully under the guidance and direction of the Hunterganj Lok Samiti activists. All the same the Jori police suspected me of being behind the movement and looked for opportunities to trap me. On 4th December 1991, as I went to the police station of Jori to secure the release of four innocent boys of our organisation, who were being mercilessly tortured by the police there, I myself was taken into custody. Zamindar Bhupendre Singh and Deputy Superintendent of Police Vijay Kumar Yadav prepared in front of me a completely false FIR accusing me of having led a crowd of 200 naxalites to harvest the Zamindar's paddy and of having shot at the Zamindar in an attempt to kill him. With these accusations I was sent to jail. I refused to be bailed out from the prison. In a press release I demanded from the Bihar government to make an inquiry and to release me unconditionally, failing which I would begin a hunger-strike in the jail from the 15th of December. On inquiry, the accusations against me were found false and I was released on the 17th of December. My detention led the people to victory in their struggle against the landlord. Inquiries were made also into the landholdings. The landlord lost his case. The villagers secured peaceful possession of their lands. Later, the Zamindar himself was taken into custody for the murder of Moti Mahato.

It was a rich experience, full of anxieties, uncertainties, feelings of helplessness, disrepute and disappointment on the one side; and on the other it was a victory full of hope and thrill. It was an experience of solidarity with others in the same struggle, and of support from a large number of people from various organisations and groups throughout Bihar and also from outside Bihar. It is difficult to give appropriate expressions to the complex experiences I have been living through during my 10 years of life-struggle in Bihar. I shall just focus my reflection now on where and how I met Jesus during these years of my struggle.

c) Jesus in our life and struggles

As already pointed out above, we, the christian members of our inter-religious Ashram community, did experience a growing awareness, especially during our prayer sessions and

community reflection that Jesus was guiding our lives and involvements.

I have not been explicitly proclaiming Christ nor was I having an identity of a missionary priest in the negative and sectarian sense of the term. At the same time both my way of life and the nature of my involvement have been motivated by faith in Jesus. I have been experiencing a keen sense of mission within me. The mission of Jesus, namely the realisation of God's Reign, which mainly consists in the creation of a more just and humane society, has been fascinating me. I believe the realisation of this mission requires a value-based societal transformation. Jesus and His gospel give us these values. I have been trying with all my limitations to work for such a transformation in the manner in which Jesus worked for it. The incarnational approach of Jesus, according to which he inserted himself into the human society, became one of us, moved with the poor and the outcast giving them power and dignity, trained disciples to continue his mission, has been the motivating force for me to move closer to the people and to insert myself into the existing communities of the poor in the rural set up of Bihar. In practice, my own limitations, springing from my culturally different background, formation and mentality, are found to be hindrances to my total identification with the people of local communities to the extent I wish.

The people's movement called Lok Samiti has been for me a medium of meeting Jesus. In my analysis and study I found that it is guided by an ideology and social analysis which are very much in line with my christian faith and convictions. Its social analysis is very much reflected in the social teachings and practice of the Church today. In practice, as I have been observing, many committed non-christian activists of Lok Samiti have been inserting themselves into the village communities of the poor and marginalised and have been trying to bring about social transformation from within, by organising and empowering the people and by preparing volunteers and leaders from among them.

Lok Samiti has been taking inspiration from Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narain and Mahatma Gandhi. I have been feeling within me that these great men, though not christians themselves,

were great spiritual leaders, very much in the spirit of Jesus. This feeling of mine with regard to Mahatma Gandhi I recently found well expressed in the following words of Martin Luther King: "Gandhi was probably the first person in human history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale". Jai Prakash Narain's concept of *Antyodaya* and his philosophy of "Total Revolution for a New Society" are accepted by the north-Indian masses better than our christian theology of "Option for the poor" and "Evangelisation for God's Kingdom", as far as theories are concerned. Both the concepts, 'Antyodaya' and 'Option for the Poor' express basically the same reality. They propose an inner disposition as well as action in favour of the poor and the marginalised in our approach towards our mission/goal. Similarly 'Total Revolution for a New Society' and 'Evangelisation for God's Kingdom' point towards the same reality of a qualitative societal change, although admittedly one can find certain nuances and differences especially with regard to the nature of the ultimate goal and the faith-content expressed therein. It depends how one understands these terms and interiorises one's understanding and concretises it in practical life. As far as I am concerned, I could see in faith the Spirit of Jesus at work in and through the lives and messages of these great men.

I feel to have experienced Jesus in and through my conflicts and struggles. His own experience of conflicts and struggles against the political, social and religious leaders, traditional structures and systems of his time for the realisation of his mission has been giving me inner strength and perseverance.

Jesus' crucifixion, which I understand, was the necessary consequence of his prophetic and challenging mission, has been the most inspiring and motivating force for my life to face the challenges and conflicts in the pursuit of my religious commitment and prophetic mission. The peak-experience of the last 10 years, where I intensely felt to have met Jesus, has been my 13 days long imprisonment in December 1991 for the legitimate and just cause of the poor farmers of Jori in Bihar. During this period and shortly thereafter I went through the experience of being deserted and rejected by some of my

close associates for whose sake and because of whom I was imprisoned.

The memory of Jesus' painfully heart-rending experience of rejection by his own disciples proved to be a source of inspiration and consolation. For me such painful experiences in our on going struggle for the cause of the poor and for a just society have been a participation, however limited in the crucifixion of Jesus.

There were several occasions during this period of involvement in Bihar, when I experienced deep-felt joy too. The growth of the marginalised and rejected individuals to personal maturity and a sense of self-worth; the collective experience of the uneducated rural communities becoming aware of the power of moral values such as equality, freedom, justice and fellowship; their ability for self-assertion; the emergence of local leaders inspite of all their limitations; and the entire growth-process of the people in the movement, though slow and ambiguous—all this has been giving me a sense of joy and fulfilment and above all a sense of hope.

Christnagar P. O.
Varanasi 221 003, U. P.

J. Neetilal

Tell the Prisoners that They Are Prisoners no more

Sr Roselyn and her team meet Jesus in their work to rescue and rehabilitate mentally ill girls and women lodged in prisons as if they were criminals, and controlled by criminals. They encounter him also in women and men who serve the same or similar causes, as well as in the victims of mistreatment.

A few months back someone asked me about my ministry: what I do, what sustains me in this ministry, where and how I meet Jesus in it. I had answered these questions quite easily, but when I was asked to put my answers in print I found it hard. I find myself more at ease as a doer and talker than as a writer. However, now I have decided to accede to that request too.

These days my work is concentrated in caring for the mentally ill women abandoned in the Kathmandu Central Prison. The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth have been giving their services to the women in the Kathmandu prison for the last several years. The Sisters assist them in their basic needs, providing legal advice, rehabilitation after release, help to their children with education and placement. Initially I too continued in this service system. Yet this very involvement and the educational background of my social work made me dream of becoming an activist who would one day effect systemic and structural changes in society. Slowly this dream ripened into a vision and began to take concrete shape.

It was on March 8th 1993, International Women's Day, that for the first time we entered Kathmandu's central prison for women for a celebration. There we witnessed the miserable plight of the mentally ill women abandoned in one section of the prison. We realized that the living conditions of all the women prisoners were poor, but we were appalled by the dehumanizing situation of the 46 mentally ill inmates, who were thrown in

with female convicts. There was vast discrimination in the way these mentally ill patients were treated. They received no hygienic attention or medical care except for a few sleeping pills administered by the inmates assigned to mind them. The women pleaded with us to take them out of the prison. "We have not committed any crime, we are being mistreated by the criminals" they said. Insanity seemed a crime, and nobody was bothered about it, neither their family nor the government. Most relatives of the mentally ill as also people in general are fed with the wrong ideas about the nature of mental illness. They are prejudiced because of the social stigma attached to mental illness, and think of it in terms of violence and bizarre behaviour.

Back home after the celebrations of that day, as a community we talked and shared our findings, feelings, reactions and the shock. We prayed and reflected as to how we could intervene in the lives of these women. We believe that Jesus is present in the midst of this suffering section of humanity and in their struggle for survival. The good news of liberation must reach out to them. We believed that whatever little we could do, would make a dent in the biased attitude of the bureaucracy and in the existing mental medicare system. Both these agencies were responsible for compounding the misery of the mentally ill. This was our challenge, this is our charism.

Slowly we began talking and negotiating with the prison superintendent and the mental health officials. They cooperated when we offered our services and facilities for the treatment and rehabilitation of these patients. The Maryknoll Fathers who operate in Nepal as a non-governmental organization offered us the needed financial support.

To give concrete shape to the vision, initially a batch of six mentally ill women were brought from the prison to our centre on May 16, 1993. Both for the sisters and the patients the initial days were hard to adjust to the new living situation: the new freedom for the women, and the loss of privacy for the sisters, as these women became part of our lives and our home. Simultaneously we also began a bi-monthly mental health clinic and allied services for those in prison. A psychiatrist comes to our centre for weekly therapy, and our centre has become a place of therapeutic community living.

Besides medicine and psychotherapy, various activities to improve their social skills began to be added as days went by.

Our decision to intervene in the lives of the mentally ill women imprisoned in the Kathmandu prison was a leap into the unknown with faith. As days went by I found this ministry challenging and rewarding. We have had our share of difficulties and problems in dealing with the government officials, as well as the families which were not ready to accept these women back home.

When we began the work in May 1993, there were 46 mentally ill women in the prison and now the number has come down to 8, thanks to the efforts of our team, the cooperation of the jail authorities and the families of these women who helped out in the rehabilitation process and affirmed us in our efforts. Our team had to travel extensively in the hilly rural areas of Nepal to identify the homes of these patients, as the prison had insufficient or no record of their whereabouts. Often we had to depend only on the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we set out. Our patients would give us some directions which did not always turn out to be right, but we had been helped by people in the bus or those we met in the mountain paths. We had the joy of witnessing many family reunions after years of separation, because many of these families had no idea as to where their mother, sister or wife was or how they ended up in prison. The women were lost and not found. Some were just unmanageable and the families did not know better than put them in prison.

The reunions I mentioned above have not always been that smooth. In this connection I would like to narrate the story of Pyari, who at the age of 19 had been put in prison by her father in 1970. What we have come to know from her mother and the neighbours is that Pyari suffered a mental shock when her father began to ill treat her mother and drove her out of the house. Pyari used to giggle and make phone calls to the Royal Palace. (I guess she wanted the king to settle the family feud). Though she was not uncontrollable, her father managed to put her in prison. Her mother was sheltered by a family in the neighbourhood, and later she also found a job in a wool factory. Pyari spent 23 long years, all her youth, in the prison.

Pyari was well loved by all in the prison because she was very helpful to all. The inmates (criminals) suggested that we help to rehabilitate her and there was a crowd of them waving good-bye at the prison gate when we had her released on July 22, 1993. She stayed at our centre for almost three months, and often requested us to take her home. On doctor's advice we accompanied Pyari to her house but her father refused to accept her back. We made a few more attempts but always met with failure. We then got the help of a woman lawyer and with the assistance of some of Pyari's neighbours organized a meeting of the community at which Pyari's parents were also present. The lawyer and the leader of the community helped to explain to the father the implications of the law and what legal action could be taken if he still refused to allow Pyari and her mother to live in their own house. But unfortunately, after listening for a while, the father just walked out of the meeting hall.

Our next step was to seek the help of the Chief District Officer. We filed a petition to the C. D. O. stating the case, and our intention to help move Pyari and her mother into their house against the father's resistance. We requested the officer to issue an order to the local police for peace and protection for Pyari and her mother. Along with the petition we enclosed a letter from the Psychiatrist which said that though not completely normal, Pyari was well enough to be rehabilitated back in her home in a protective environment and her mother's care. The C. D. O. co-operated and being a woman was all the more empathetic.

The next day when, Pyari and her mother, with two of us social workers and representatives of the community and the lawyer arrived at their home, the father again refused them entry. We were able to persuade him to go with us to the C. D. O's office where the officer tried her best to convince the man to allow Pyari and her mother to live in their house but the man was relentless. She then called on the Superintendent of Police to use some pressure tactics. Our efforts continued but there was no change. Finally, C. D. O. ordered that the father be put behind the bars and be given some time to think. Sure enough after three days the man relented. We were once again called to the C. D. O's office where Pyari's father signed an agreement

stating that he would take Pyari and her mother in and give them their share of the house and property.

We have made several follow up visits to that family. Pyari is slowly adjusting to her new yet old environment. She earns some money by preparing cotton wicks for temple lamps. She shares room with her mother. Her mother supports her. She has two meals with her mother, morning and evening. The father provides her with afternoon tea and snacks. Her parents are not on talking terms yet. I have found Pyari several times at the prison gates, visiting good old friends. I think she feels home sick for the jail, her accustomed home for 23 years and for all her friends there.

As I reflect on Pyari's rehabilitation story, on the one hand I feel good about our action for justice, all the public awareness it has brought about, the involvement of the community and the officials in this process. On the other hand, when I see Pyari look a bit lonely and lost, I wonder if we did the right thing to bring her out of the prison where she was appreciated and had got used to the way of life. I wanted to check this with Pyari herself and asked her the same question. She just giggled and that puzzles me. A month ago Pyari underwent a major surgery, removal of her fibroid uterus. She has recovered marvellously and now comes to our centre daily for a few hours. She does simple knitting under the guidance of the house mother. She earns a small sum of money as remuneration and is quite happy that she is working.

Our intervention and advocacy work for these women in the prison continues. At present we are caring for seven women staying at our centre and two who are hospitalized. The facilities for the mental health of the people are far from satisfactory in Nepal. There are many positive aspects as a result of our involvement. We have been able to enter into dialogue with the prison system and have seen positive changes taking place. These days hardly any mentally ill are admitted into the prison. Attitudes of the prison authorities and the inmates (criminals) toward the mentally ill have changed for the better. We have been able to do some family counselling to educate the family and society to accept mental illness as any other illness that can be treated and cured, and that the person can function productively

in the family and society in a conducive environment with supportive techniques. Our Navjyoti Centre offers various forms of support like helping with the supply of medicines for those who cannot afford, follow-up visits, economic assistance for self support activities and counselling. Our readiness to help out in case of a relapse has helped the families to accept the women back in their homes.

We have thus reached out to a small section of the marginalized women. We have tried to witness to Christ in a Hindu Kingdom by being a lamp that makes a difference in the darkness in our response "to the least of our sisters" by offering them our friendship, acceptance and love. We rejoice and shed tears of joy when some of the rehabilitated ones return with their family to visit us. We meet Jesus in His passion and resurrection in these women, in their suffering and restoration to fuller life. They have become so much a part of our lives and our prayers. They have taught us to be compassionate and caring, to move social systems to uphold dignity of human persons and bring about justice. We pioneered into this ministry and we are happy now to see women of other faiths and organizations coming forward to collaborate as well as enter into similar activities. May be within a year or two we can move into other areas in this ministry. God surely has unique ways of using us as peace bearers and messengers of His Kingdom. I feel privileged to belong to the family of SCN Community with a charism that inspires us to take risks and has a pioneering spirit. This is an exciting time for me in community and mission.

Navjyoti
Post Box 3675
Kathmandu, Nepal

Roselyn Karakattu

“Where is He?”

Meeting Jesus Christ in Delhi

Here George Mlakuzhy describes the broken condition of a variety of victims (of poison gas, of communal riots, of slum fires, of neglectful driving), and discovers in them and in those concerned for their suffering and misery, the Face of Jesus of Nazareth. He finds Jesus also in slum children's joy and growth made possible by committed youth whose ultimate loyalty is to Jesus. A concluding reflection makes clear the theological horizons of this meditation.

Introduction

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking: *Where is he?* (Mt. 2:1-2).

At the birth of Jesus an angel of God had announced to the poor shepherds living in the open and keeping watch over their flock by night: "To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (Lk. 2:10-12). The shepherds found their *Messiah in the manger* (2:16), for the Saviour was born in a stable, "because there was no place" (2:7) in any inn in the city of David!

The first question put to Jesus in the Gospel of John is: "Rabbi, *where are you staying?*" (Jn. 1:38). And Jesus' answer to the would-be disciples is an invitation: *Come and see* (1:39).

Today also many seekers are asking: *Where is he?* and *Where have you met him?* Like the shepherds, the wise men and the disciples of the Baptist, they may be surprised to find Jesus in the most unexpected places. This piece is an attempt to articulate and reflect upon some of my experiences of meeting him among the marginalized in the capital of our country. It is also an invitation to the readers to "come and see" his dwelling-place among the downtrodden in Delhi.

The number of victims of injustice and exploitation is on the increase in our rural and urban society. Our newspapers are full of reports of atrocities perpetrated on the poor by the rich, on the Dalits by the high castes, on the helpless by the police etc. The economic policies of our government dictated by the IMF, World Bank and Multi-national Corporations, in collusion with the wealthy landlords and industrialists, have driven millions of small farmers and landless labourers out of their villages to the crowded city pavements and filthy slums along the Yamuna banks. Ruthless mammon-worshippers sacrifice the street-children on the altar of drugs and prostitution. Unscrupulous politicians and irreligious religious leaders pollute and poison the cosmopolitan and multi-religious atmosphere of Delhi by sowing suspicion and hatred among different communities. The cancer of communalism spreads its tentacles over unsuspecting poor people struggling to earn a living by the sweat of their undernourished bodies. Corrupt bureaucrats and bribe-hungry police suck the blood of the have-nots and fatten themselves. The State and Central governments close their eyes to the plight of the poor, and their ears to the cries of the exploited. Lawyers and courts delay and deny justice to victims of reckless driving, drug-trafficking and gas tragedies. The sight of air-conditioned skyscrapers for the elite in New Delhi and the plight of the marginalized *jhuggi* (hut)-dwellers in the trans-Yamuna slums without drinking water or drainage, toilets or electricity, schools or hospitals, speak volumes about the discriminatory attitude of the administration.

In this dark horizon of Delhi, however, there are rays of hope. The victims of injustice and exploitation are beginning to become aware of their rights. Many voluntary organizations and humanitarian individuals have begun to give voice to the voiceless. The struggle for social justice, freedom and equality has started. The victimized majority-population of the poor of Delhi will one day be vindicated and victorious, and will claim their rightful place in the capital and become a beacon of hope for the rest of the country.

1. Bhopal gas victims

On the night of December 2/3, 1984, 13000 gallons (40 tons) of poison gas (MIC) were poured over the unsuspecting

people of Bhopal by the American multinational Union Carbide. It killed more than five thousand men, women and children sleeping in their homes, and injured more than five lakh people.

Shortly before the sixth anniversary of the Bhopal gas Disaster Mr. Abdul Jabbar, the convener of BGPMUS (*Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan* = Women's Organization of Bhopal Gas Victims) wrote: "There are no words to describe the death, disease and destruction that has gone on in these six years. Even today hundreds of thousands of people continue to suffer from physical and mental ailments caused by their exposure to the highly toxic gases. They continue to die after prolonged suffering... People who used to make a living through physical labour have been so ravaged by the toxic gases that they cannot do their usual work"¹. The industrial Hiroshima has not only killed thousands but also incapacitated lakhs for life. It is still taking its toll in Bhopal.

A press release on "Hiroshima Day" in 1991 by BGPSSS (*Bhopal Gas Peedith Sangarsh Sahyog Samiti* = Bhopal Gas Victims' Struggle Collaboration Committee) stated: "The gas victims pointed out that while the people of Hiroshima were the victims of a deliberate political act [by U. S. government], the people of Bhopal were victims of unquenching corporate greed... The victims categorically stated that the double standards of safety adopted by the U. S. multinational company was the root cause of the disaster"².

The Government of India too is found guilty of complicity with the Union Carbide Corporation and therefore partly responsible for the world's biggest industrial disaster because it permitted the multinational, without providing adequate safeguards, "to engage in an inherently hazardous chemical process, to run a plant whose design itself was dangerous"³.

For the above-mentioned reasons, the inadequate amount of 750 crore rupees (\$ 470 million) "as full and final settlement"

1 Abdul Jabbar's letter (16-11-1990) to *Bhopal Gas Peedith Sangarsh Sahyog Samiti*, p. 1.

2 "Press Release" of 6-8-91, p. 1. (BGPSSS is a voluntary organization started in Delhi for the sake of showing solidarity with and support to the Bhopal gas victims in their struggle for justice).

3 *Ibid.*

between the Rajiv Gandhi Government and the Union Carbide Corporation, announced by the Supreme Court on February 15, 1989, was considered by the gas victims as suspect, "unconstitutional, illegal and immoral"⁴. Insult was added to injury by absolving the guilty Union Carbide of all criminal liabilities.

When about 3000 Bhopal victims were protesting against the above illegal agreement and demanding that interim relief and adequate medical treatment be given to the victims and that the Union Carbide's pesticide plant and its Research and Development Centre ("functioning under a shadow of suspicion") in Bhopal be closed down, they were brutally beaten up by the police and more than fifty gas-affected women were grievously injured. "The government reacted to their action for justice by letting loose the police on them who pelted stones on the victims and cracked their bones with *lathis* (batons). The women had gathered peacefully at the Centre, demanding its closure; but many of them had to be carried away later with fractured limbs and serious head injuries... The BGPMUS stated to the press that by getting the police to attack gas affected women with sticks and stones the government has proved that it is all set to use inhuman methods to force the settlement with Union Carbide on the people and protect the assets of the killer multinational"⁵.

As part of the prolonged struggle for justice large numbers of Bhopal gas victims came to Delhi a number of times and staged many rallies and *dharnas* (picketing) especially before the Supreme Court and at the Boat Club close to the Parliament to demand adequate compensation for the victims and criminal prosecution of Union Carbide. BGPSSS has been actively involved in organizing mass meetings, marches and *dharnas* in Delhi together with the people of Bhopal. I shall briefly describe one of such unforgettable occasions and indicate where and how I met the "multi-faced" Jesus Christ.

In the morning of 25th August 1989 about fifty BGPSSS volunteers were waiting at the Nizamuddin railway station to welcome about 2500 Bhopal gas victims who were expected to

4 *Bhopal* (published by Bhopal Group for Information and Action), August 9, 1989, p. 2.

5 *Ibid.*

reach Delhi on that day. As the trains pulled in, groups mainly of poor women, clad mostly in dark clothes, many of them looking quite sickly, some holding black banners and others little babes in their arms and all of them shouting slogans against the Union Carbide and the unjust settlement (mentioned above) filled the platforms. Their cries for justice created in my heart echoes of the bound Jesus' courageous question to the man who slapped him in public in the palace of the high priest Annas: "If I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" Anger, anguish and protest were written large on their faces.

As the gas victims started their long march towards the Supreme Court, their loud cries for justice rent the Delhi air. After walking a couple of kilometres, many sickly persons started gasping for air and searching frantically for water. The police had done their dirty trick in an attempt to break up the rally (under instruction from the authorities?): they had derouted the water tankers that were hired to accompany the rally, knowing fully well that the gas victims would not be able to reach their destination without drinking water. Many, especially the old and the infirm, like Jesus carrying the cross, struggled hard to drag their slow and unsteady feet forward. Some fainted on the way and had to be picked up by the medical team of volunteers. I was reminded of Jesus' falls on the way to Calvary and the help given by Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross.

When they reached the Supreme Court after a long, tortuous, tiring march, the large iron gates in front of the Court were closed and a big contingent of police was posted there to prevent the gas victims from coming close to the Court, lest the judges should be disturbed by their cries for justice! Though exhausted and hungry, they shouted slogans at the top of their voices demanding that the illegal settlement between the Union Carbide and the Government of India be scrapped, that the guilty multinational be punished for genocide; that the gas victims' rights to life and health be protected; and that adequate compensation be paid to them. Some hidden inner force seemed to energize those simple women (mostly Muslims, who symbolically, as it were, had removed the veils from their faces) who were determined to fight for justice. The massive presence of the police force, instead of frightening them, and in spite of their recent experience of being brutally beaten up, seemed to

encourage and steel them to face any eventuality. The memories of their dear ones poisoned by the Union Carbide revived their spirits. The crucified seemed to rise victorious from their graves. Good Friday and Easter appeared to coalesce into one. The Paschal mystery was being enacted anew before my very eyes!

During the day-long *dharna* many of the survivors of the gas disaster, though illiterate and never used to speaking in public meetings, dared to come to the mike and describe their agonizing experiences of 3rd December 1984 and the way of the cross that they have had to tread. Many of them declared their readiness to die for the cause of justice so that their children might have a safer and better life. Mothers who have suffered labour pain to give birth to children know the meaning of all life-giving sufferings. Have they not shared in the Paschal mystery? Is not the Spirit that gives life operative in them? Can we see the face of Jesus behind the *purdah*?

The generosity of the Sikh *gurudwaras* in providing adequate food to more than 3000 Bhopal gas victims is most praiseworthy. I recall with admiration and gratitude the numerous Sikh volunteers who spent night and day to wash the dishes, cut the vegetables, clean and cook the *dal* (pulse), prepare the *chappati* (bread) etc., who would never be known by the beneficiaries of their labour of love. The scene of the risen Jesus preparing breakfast early in the morning for the tired disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee flashed through my mind. Do we dare to ask the *turbaned* Jesus: "Who are you" (Jn. 21:12)? Do we have the eyes of faith to recognize the risen Lord behind the turbans? The Sikh volunteers had the same genuine concern for the Bhopal people who came to Delhi as Jesus had when he asked Philip: "Where are we to buy bread that these people may eat?" (Jn. 6:5). Is not Jesus telling his disciples today: "You give them something to eat" (Mk. 6:37)? "How many loaves have you? Go and see" (Mk. 6:38). Can the miracle of the multiplication of loaves take place today only in the Sikh *gurudwaras* (and not in the Christian Churches)?⁶

6 The Delhi *gurudwaras* have been giving food to thousands of Bhopal gas victims whenever they came to the capital (e. g. in Nov-Dec. 1990 and July-Aug. 1991), and to hundreds of slum children during the *Bal Mela* every year (as we shall see below).

2. Seelampur communal riot victims

The barbarous destruction of the Babri Masjid by the *Sangh Parivar* on 6th December 1992 "unleashed a week of terror and carnage directed against Muslims all over India. Seelampur in East Delhi is one such instance..." "Between the 7th and the 11th of December, the trans-Yamuna colonies of Jaffrabad and Seelampur witnessed some of the worst anti-Muslim riots witnessed in Delhi, in which both mobs of Hindus and the police were involved"⁷.

According to the SVA report: 23 Muslims lost their lives and hundreds were injured. Over a hundred shops and houses in Timber market and 254 houses in Janata colony were burnt and looted. Assi Plot and Kabootar market have a smaller number of Muslim residents, who also suffered damage to life and property"⁸.

Since Janata Colony was the worst affected area in the Seelampur riots, I shall describe briefly what I saw and heard there, when I visited the area during the days following the Satanic day of the *Sang parivar*.

Except for a few brick buildings which were blackened by smoke, all the houses (mostly *jhuggis*) were reduced to ashes, over which wailing women and old men (most of the young men had either been arrested or disappeared for fear of arrest) were sitting shivering in the biting cold and in utter despair. Some were trying to recover from the ashes any partially burnt box, utensil etc. Most had lost not only their houses but also all their belongings except what was on their bodies.

7 *Seelampur 1992: A Report on the Communal Violence in Seelampur* (New Delhi, 1992), prepared by *Sampradayikta Virodhi Andolan* (SVA Movement Against Communalism) for People's Movement for Secularism (PMS), "I. Over all Narrative."

"The SVA is a group of concerned individuals formed in November 1984 specifically to engage..... in an all-round struggle against communalism" ("Appendix: Perspective Document of the *Sampradayikta Virodhi Andolan*", No. 1).

PMS was born on December 7, 1992 in New Delhi as a spontaneous response of a large number of teachers, journalists, social activists, playwrights, artists and others to the destruction of the Babri Masjid, seeking to spread the message of peace and communal harmony, and counter the fascist forces through an assertion of Secularism.

8 *Ibid.*, "Conclusion."

Charred sewing machines, burnt bicycles, scorched rickshaws stood as silent witnesses to the destruction of the poor people's livelihood by the vandals of communal frenzy. Some were too shocked to speak. Others poured out their tales of distress and wept over their murdered or wounded dear ones. All we could do for the moment was to listen to the agony of their hearts and share in their sufferings, echoing the cry of the crucified Jesus: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46). Seeing the weeping women, frightened children and sad old men, the suffering Jesus seemed to say to me: "Behold, your mother"! "Behold, your brothers and sisters"! Since, unlike the Beloved Disciple, I couldn't take them all home, I stayed with them for hours on that day and on many other days, as they poured out their sorrows into my heart.

It took days before a clear picture emerged of how the communal violence in Janata Colony took place and who its perpetrators were. A brief summary of my findings which have been corroborated by the SVA report is given below⁹.

As a symbol of protest against the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6th December by the Hindu fanatics, many Muslims in the Janata colony hoisted black flags on their roofs on 7th morning.

Even though on the 9th Shiv Sena had a meeting in the vicinity which caused some consternation and anxiety among the Muslims, till 10th night everything appeared peaceful but for some slogan-shouting and a menacing announcement from the nearby Hindu temple that if the Muslims react, they would be taught a hard lesson. All night they could hear noises from the neighbouring Welcome Colony where a mosque was being attacked, and could see from the house-tops smoke billowing from areas near the Masjid (Kabootar market). Some sounds of gun-shots could also be heard at a distance.

On 11th a Hindu mob from Shahadra, shouting religious slogans and wielding swords, *trishuls* (tridents) and rifles, began congregating near the house of a wealthy milkman and BJP supporter. Once arrayed on roof-tops the crowd started stoning the Janata Colony. Meanwhile, Muslims gathered inside a mosque retaliated by throwing stones. The assault from the

9 *Ibid.*, "Janata Colony".

roof tops was stepped up. Soon petrol bombs and burning rags were thrown at the huts.

The police, instead of trying to control the situation, exhorted the mob to "go ahead, burn and loot". "As the houses began to burn, and the frightened residents began to run for shelter, the rioting mobs, accompanied by the police began to attack them. Shouting slogans, groups of men rushed into houses slashing at people with swords and knives, looting the houses, and then setting them on fire... People were fired at by the police, when they attempted to douse the fires by using water from the drains near their houses. The mob moved from house to house looting and burning. Men were wantonly assaulted, and many were killed..."¹⁰ Fires spread rapidly and gutted also the *jhuggis* of the Hindu Harijans in the neighbourhood. No fire-engines or ambulances were allowed inside the area till the pre-planned attack was over.

The SVA report concludes by stating: "The violence in Seelampur was not a 'riot', a word which suggests spontaneous mass violence. It was as carefully planned and executed as the destruction of the Babri Masjid"¹¹. And some of the features highlighted by the SVA investigation are:

1. The attacks on Timber market, Z block; Kabootar market, Assi plot; and Janata colony were simultaneous. At each of these areas, there was a two hundred strong mob, accompanied by armed police, and known prominent residents of the locality were identified as being involved.
2. In the course of the violence, the boundary between the roles of the police and the mob is blurred. It is quite clear that the rioters had the sanction of the police, who either accompanied the mobs or watched from vehicles parked nearby. In addition, the police themselves shot at fleeing Muslims, beat up and harassed men dragged from their homes, and used communally abusive language. In short, the police was both violent and communal¹².

The horrible stories some of the victims reminded me of the Nazi brutalities against the Jews shockingly portrayed

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

in the hair-raising films “the Holocaust” and “Schindler’s List”. What the SS and the Nazi police did to the innocent Jews was done to the Muslims of Seelampur by the Hindu fanatics and the communalized police. No one dared to answer the victims’ oft-repeated question: “Why did they do this to us?” The power-crazy Herods of today have let loose hell on the innocent Muslims and butchered them with the connivance of the Delhi police, who are paid to protect the people!

How could anyone, some may wonder, find the Saviour in such demonic situations in which the heartless, calculated human brutality tramples over other human beings and leaves a trail of wanton looting and maimed or dead bodies? Many men, women and children had to flee for their lives (like the flight into Egypt of Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus), leaving behind their property and belongings to be looted and destroyed. Can a Christian fail to see the face of suffering Jesus in the traumatized people of Seelampur? What the Jewish Pharisees and high priests and the Roman Pilate and soldiers did to Jesus on Good Friday was repeated by the religious fanatics and power-crazy politicians and communal police. The people of Seelampur have been subjected to a prolonged crucifixion whose scars are still visible today. Not only dozens have been done away with, hundreds injured, thousands rendered roofless, and lakhs of rupees worth property looted or destroyed, but also the community of Muslims and Hindu Harijans living together in harmony in Janata Colony has been dealt a mortal blow, splitting it in the middle along communal lines. It is still bleeding like that of the pierced body of Jesus on the cross.

The PMS and other volunteers were able, like Simon of Cyrene who helped Jesus to carry the cross and the anonymous person who offered a drink to the thirsty Jesus on the cross, to give some relief (worth lakhs of rupees) to the riot victims of Seelampur in the form of food, clothes, blankets, cooking utensils, vessels, trunks, medicines etc. Generous doctors, lawyers, social workers, professors, students etc. proved themselves to be true Samaritans who cared for those wounded and left on the roadside by the *Sang Parivar*, while the religious heads and political leaders passed them by. There were persons like Dr. Sahney who spent days and nights treating freely the affected

people of Janata Colony. In his love and dedication for the riot victims I met Jesus who cured all kinds of sick persons who flocked to him for healing. There were compassionate and committed women like Mrs. Tani Bhargav, who, though she had a broken leg and so was forced to be confined to bed for a long time, raised large funds for relief work by contacting organizations and individuals through phone. She considered her broken leg a blessing from God which enabled her to help the broken people of Seelampur. There were others like Gautam Navlakha, the president of the PMS, who organized, together with other voluntary groups, rallies and demonstrations for communal harmony and prevented further communal violence in other parts of the capital. There were artists who staged street plays on communal harmony in different parts of the city and conscientized the masses against the communal cancer that destroys secularism. There were social activists who went from house to house to promote inter-religious understanding and human fellowship. The life-giving Spirit of Jesus has been released from the cross of Seelampur and has been operative in all these volunteers and organizations. Those who were actively involved in the works of relief and reconciliation revealed the compassionate face of Jesus, while those who raised their voices through rallies, demonstrations, protest-marches, pamphlets like *Manas* (published by SVA), etc. manifested the prophetic face of Jesus who was angry at the abuse of religion by religio-political leaders and who used a whip to chase the vendors out of the temple in Jerusalem.

The hutments of the children of God (Muslims and Hindus) in Seelampur were destroyed by the fanatics but new brick houses were built for all of them, not "in three days" (Jn. 2:19) but in three months. They are symbols of the risen life that is born of the crucifixion the people experienced in December 1992. The Hindu-Muslim committee that is in the process of being formed is a sign of a better future of mutual co-operation and harmonious new life. May the light of communal amity shine from Seelampur and enlighten the hearts of those still living in the darkness of communal prejudices and hatred!

3. Sanjay Amar slum fire victims

More than half the population of Delhi lives in resettlement colonies and subhuman slums. Slum-dwellers are the victims of

manifold exploitation by the politicians, police, criminals, drug-traffickers, quack doctors, bureaucrats, businessmen etc.

More than six thousand families from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Bangladesh are living in *jhuggis* along the banks of the river Yamuna behind the Red Fort. Many of them have been staying there for more than twenty years. And yet there is hardly any drinking water, drainage, toilet facilities, or electricity, because Sanjay Amar Colony is an unauthorized slum. Every year during the rainy season the place gets flooded and the families have to go away and pitch their tents behind the Red Fort and, when the water recedes, rebuild their huts and start life all over again. There are also at least two or three fires every year, which reduce to ashes not only their *jhuggis* but often all their belongings. Sometimes children and old or sick people fall prey to the fires especially at night.

On 15th January 1990, for instance, when the people were fast asleep, a fire broke out and gutted more than 3000 *jhuggis*. We went there the next day to do a survey of the affected people. When we inquired about the cause of the fire, many persons, to our great surprise, told us: *Oopervale ne kiya hai* ("God has done it")! Gradually, however, we found out that the fire was not an accident; it was, most probably, purposely started by a businessman of the slum who sells bamboos and other materials for building *jhuggis*. And yet many of the simple poor people who lost their huts bought the materials from him! Though there has been serious suspicion about the cause of the frequent fires there, the government has never ordered an inquiry! Every time there is a fire, the maximum the Delhi administration would do is to give an alms of Rs. 500 per family! The plight of these unfortunate and exploited ones does not seem to bother also the politicians, except when the elections are round the corner, when they visit the slum with folded hands and empty promises!

Whenever there was fire in Sanjay Amar, however, voluntary organizations like *Caritas*, *CASA* etc. have been generous in providing the poor people with food, clothes, blankets, utensils etc. The Good Samaritans have come to the rescue of those abandoned by the government and bureaucrats. Due to the slow but steady conscientization of the slum-dwellers by

selfless volunteers and social activists, the people are becoming aware of their exploitation by vested interests and of the step-motherly treatment by the Delhi government and administration. For example, after two fires on February 5 and 6, 1994, had reduced to ashes 2500 huts, on 9th February, for the first time in the history of Sanjay Amar, a group of the representatives of the people went to meet the Chief Minister of Delhi with a memorandum requesting him to let the people build brick houses so that fires and floods would not easily destroy their homes and belongings many times every year. The moment Sanjay Amar Colony was mentioned, a Congress-I MLA, who was sitting next to the CM, intervened; "Sanjay Amar is full of Bangladeshis"! The CM pleaded helplessness and passed the buck to the Central government: he could not give them the permission sought, because it would go against the master plan for Delhi, which is under the Central Government. The poor people of Sanjay Amar are caught between the devil and the deep sea.

According to the Slum Commissioner, Sanjay Amar land belongs to four different departments: Delhi Development Authority, Municipal Corporation of Delhi, Flood control Department and Northern Railways; and so it would be impossible to get permission to build good houses there. If the people were to approach the Governor, he too would probably wash his hands! I recall how Jesus was shuttled between the Roman governor Pilate and the Jewish king Herod, and how Jesus though publicly declared innocent, was finally condemned to death.

As the government condemns the slum people to live in insecurity and subhuman conditions, so the Delhi police tries to exploit them. One evening I was walking along a narrow alley in Sanjay Amar, when I saw two policemen trying to uproot the bamboo-pillars of a hut extended by a poor family. Seeing me they quickly moved away. I asked the old lady sitting in the hut: "What were the policemen doing and why?" She said: "Sir, you should know, for they come every month for their dues!" The drug traffickers, the liquor barons, the sex pimps, the quack doctors¹³ etc. share their booty with the

13 According to *Newstrack* (March 14, 1994) there are about twenty thousand quack doctors in Delhi mostly in the slums and resettlement colonies.

police. "They parted my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (Jn 19:24). What the soldiers did to the crucified Jesus on Calvary is continued today in the Delhi slums.

Though the situation in Sanjay Amar is so grim for the fifty thousand population, there are silver linings in the dark horizon. A *mahila sang* (women's association) has been formed to fight for their rights. Recently women held a rally and a dharna before the police station, demanding that the police take action against the drug peddlers who are ruining the lives of the youth in the slum. Probably it was the first time that women of Sanjay Amar dared to protest against police inaction against and complicity in crimes committed in the slum. Similarly during a public meeting after the two fires in February 1994 referred to earlier, an inspiring and insightful slum leader urged the people to protest against the Delhi administration's apathy towards them: *sathiyo, marna hai to jeena sikho; jeena hai to marna sikho*: "Comrades, if you have to die, learn to live; if you have to live, learn to die" and "One day all of us will have to die; so let us be ready to die today so that tomorrow our children may not die in the fires and that they may have a better life". When Jesus was about to enter the mystery of his passion-death-resurrection, he said: "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified... unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn. 12:23-25). When many more would be willing to die for a better future for others, a new life will sprout and bear abundant fruit in the Sanjay Amar slum.

Just as God spoke to Moses from the burning bush about Israel's sufferings in Egypt and His plan of liberating them, so has God spoken to some in the Sanjay Amar slum on the occasion of the frequent fires there. As on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God has descended on them in the form of fire. It gives them courage to speak and act against all forms of discrimination and injustice. The Christian communities are invited to listen to the Spirit speaking to them through the prophets of today and to read the signs of the times and join hands with the conscientized poor people to build God's kingdom in our cities and villages.

4. Bus accident victim

At about 3.00 p. m. on 28th September 1991 a fourteen year old beggar girl Rasila Sadhram from Sanjay Amar slum was crossing the road within the Inter-State Bus Stand (I. S. B. T.) in Delhi, when a Haryana Roadways bus knocked her down and ran over her left foot, crushing it. A poor fruit vendor called Govinda saw the accident and carried the girl to the First Aid Post at I. S. B. T., where her foot was bandaged. Then he took her in an auto to her home in Sanjay Amar slum and later accompanied her to the Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan (L. N. J. P. N.) hospital together with her mother and sister. Govinda proved himself to be a Good Samaritan.

The conductor of the bus went to the hospital and asked Rasila's father not to file any case, and to come to the Haryana Roadways office at I. S. B. T. before 6.00 p. m. for a "compromise-solution". Again, Subinspector from I. S. B. T. Police Post, who had arrested the driver and impounded the bus, told Rasila's mother the next day that he let go the driver and the bus, since her husband had not reported to the Haryana Roadways office or the Police Post the previous day! It is also surprising that though Rasila's accident was reported to the police at the L. N. J. P. N. hospital, and the police there had sent her with a slip to the casualty, we found later that nothing was recorded in the register. Though medicines and injections were given by the doctor on duty and an X-ray of her foot was taken, no Medical Legal Certificate from the hospital was available! Doesn't all this point to a collusion between the conductor, the police and the doctors to protect the killer-driver and to prevent the poor victim from getting just compensation? Today's police-Pilates and doctor-priests plot to release the robber-Barabbases and crucify the innocent Rasila-Jesuses!

The doctors at L. N. J. P. N. advised Rasila's foot to be amputated. Her grieving father, hoping to save his daughter's leg, took her all the way to the Vadilal Sarabhai General Hospital at Ahmedabad. But by 30th September gangrene had set in and her leg below the knee had to be cut off.

Rasila was maimed for life. But it was a Herculean task that took months to get an FIR and a compensation case filed. Only when a Supreme Court lawyer threatened to take action

against the police did the latter begin to cooperate. A generous Good Samaritan, Adv. Tejinder Singh Ahuja, is fighting for the last two and a half years for adequate compensation for Rasila.

Our persevering love and concern for Rasila has given her new hope. I feel sure that she has really participated in the Paschal mystery of Jesus. Her earlier desperate look has now changed to a hopeful smile. The new conviction the Rasila-episode has generated in the Sanjay Amar slum people that they too can fight for their rights, instead of accepting everything as fate, is another sure sign of the presence of the risen Jesus in them. The crucified children of God today are being raised up by Him, as Jesus was raised two thousand years ago.

5. Slum children and the Bal Mela

The first time I visited a slum, I was shocked to see the unhygienic and inhuman conditions in which the poor, especially the children, were forced to live. Dozens of unwashed children with running noses and dirty clothes were sitting in slushy, stinking surroundings with garbage full of flies. A wave of repulsion went through my nerves when two of them came running and clasped my hands and pants with the words of salutation: *namasthe, masterji*. (This was the familiar way the children used to greet the Vidyajyoti students who conduct classes for them). It was not easy for me to find Jesus in those dirty children in rags, just as it may have been at first difficult for the shepherds in Bethlehem to recognize their Saviour in a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Behind those masks of dirt there were beautiful faces radiating the spontaneous love and trust implanted by God in His children. Only later I recalled the words of Jesus: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19:14).

Last three years Vidyajyoti has been celebrating "Slum Children's Day" (*Bal Mela*). About 400 children from seven different slums of Delhi are brought to St. Xavier's School grounds for a whole day of sports and cultural programmes.

Most of these slum children are non-school-going. Many of them are beggars, rag-pickers, dish-washers, shoe-blacks, baby-sitters, vendors of groundnuts or fruits at bus-stands or street-corners. Most of them have never experienced the joys

of childhood; they are forced to earn a living in their tender age.

The first time the slum children had the *Bal Mela*, they were pleasantly surprised to see the well-dressed students and staff of Vidyajyoti sitting with them on the ground and sharing the simple meal provided by the *Gurudwara*. Probably for the first time in their lives the children from different regions (Bihar, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamilnadu etc.), different religions (Muslim, Hindu, Christian) and castes (high, low and Dalits) had the experience of eating together as a sign of their human solidarity in an otherwise communal, caste-conscious and class-prejudiced society. Are not the *chappatis* (bread) they shared and the water/tea they drank from the same plastic glasses, like the loaves and the fish in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, symbolic of the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity of the new covenantal community of love and fellowship? Do we have the faith to recognize the risen Jesus in the breaking of the bread, as the Emmaus disciples had on Easter Sunday?

The spontaneity, creativity and sense of unity of the slum children were manifest in the way they played, sang, and danced to their heart's content. Their sense of solidarity, irrespective of caste, creed, colour or sex, was enhanced through group participation in various sports items. The cultural programs like skits and street plays, slogan shouting (e.g. *ham sub bachhe ek hain* = "all of us children are one"), group songs and dance too stressed the theme of oneness (*ham sub ek hain*). I wish the song of unity and universal brotherhood which the slum children sang with gusto and enthusiasm were in the hearts and on the lips of all the adults in our communally tense country:

Chorus: "We are all one; we'll all remain one."

"If we cannot become the sun, we shall become the stars."

We shall become someone's helpers.

If we cannot become the moon, we shall become the lamps.

We shall become someone's helpers.

If we cannot become the sea, we shall become the drops.

We shall become someone's helpers,

If we cannot become rivers, we shall become canals.

We shall become someone's helpers¹⁴."

14 This is my translation of the Hindi song which was composed for the

The impact of the *Bal Mela* on the children was so great that a few months later the Hindu children of Sanjay Amar slum, for instance, invited the Muslim children in the neighbourhood to a Hindu feast and offered them *prasad*. A few days later the Muslim children reciprocated by inviting their Hindu neighbours for a Muslim feast. Is not Jesus speaking to us through the actions of these little ones: "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3), the kingdom of love and brotherhood, peace and harmony, for which the adults are longing? Is not Jesus still giving us a Messianic message through these neglected and despised slum children, as he once did in the manger at Bethlehem?

6. Meeting Jesus Christ yesterday and today¹⁵

According to the Gospel of Luke Jesus begins his public ministry with the Nazareth manifesto:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk. 4:18-19).

Here Jesus highlights the definite orientation of his God-given mission in favour of the poor, the prisoners, the oppressed,

occasion by a student of Vidyajyoti. The original is as follows:

ham sab ek hain; ham sab ek rahenge.

suraj na ban saken to sitare banenge;

kisi na kisi ke sahare banenge.

chanda na ban seken to diye banenge;

kisi na kisi ke sahare banenge.

sagar na ban saken to boonden banenge;

kisi na kisi ke sahare banenge.

nadiyan na ban saken to naharen banenge;

kisi na kisi ke sahare banenge.

15 I could narrate many more instances where I have met Jesus Christ in Delhi especially among the oppressed and the marginalized, e. g. the lepers in Azadpur slum who were used by the drug dons; the slum-dwellers of Sultanpuri who were victims of police atrocities; the Kashmiri refugees who had to flee their homes because of harassment by the militants and the security forces; the Tribal working women who are exploited by their employers; the Tihar Jail prisoners etc. But due to lack of space I shall conclude my sharing with a few theological reflections.

the lost, the last and the least in society. Here he gives us a *hermeneutical key* to rightly understand his mission and correctly interpret his ministry. He tells us where to look for him and where to find him.

Jesus made this preferential option for the poor in the light of his religious experience as the "beloved Son" of God during his baptism in the Jordan in solidarity with the people of his time and during the trials and temptations in the wilderness where he struggled in the Spirit against the demonic forces of mammon with its allurements of riches, power and prestige (Lk. 3:21-22; 4:1-13).

Jesus sees his mission in the line of the prophets like Elijah and Elisha who cared for the widow of Zarephath and cured the leper Naaman the Syrian respectively (4:24-27). His option for the outcasts and the underprivileged is furiously opposed by the synagogue-goers of Nazareth ("When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage": 4:28). The rejection of Jesus by the people of his hometown ("They got up, drove him out of the town"... 4:29) is symbolic of the fate of the Dalits who are forced to dwell on the outskirts of our cast-ridden villages and the marginalized *jhuggi*-dwellers living in subhuman slums on the periphery of our cosmopolitan cities like Delhi and Bombay.

We have seen above how Bhopal gas victims, Seelampur riot victims, Sanjay Amar fire victims and others have begun to protest against their marginalization and exploitation and to demand that justice be done to them. Like Jesus who goes to confront his armed arrest-party courageously but non-violently (Jn. 18:2-11), they are ready to face and challenge the politicians, the police, the religious leaders and the judges. Like Jesus who remonstrated against the unjust and humiliating slap by an officer (18:22-23), the victims of injustice have begun to raise their voices against the insolent affront to their human dignity and the blatant violations of social justice. Can we hear Jesus' voice in their cries of protest?

The unjustly condemned Jesus of Nazareth is the prototype of the victims of political expediency and religious fanaticism. The crucified Jesus is the "king" of all the downtrodden in the world, whether they be Jews or Gentiles, Latins or Greeks (Jn. 19:20), Hindus or Muslims, slum-dwellers or gas victims.

The crucified Jesus gives up his spirit by giving his Spirit (*paredoken to pneuma*) to those who offer him a drink (Jn. 19:30). The life-giving Spirit is bestowed by the dying Jesus not only on his disciples but on all those who care for the hungry, the thirsty and the crucified. Is not therefore his Spirit present in all the struggling and suffering masses of our people and in all the volunteers who stand by the crucified of today and care for them selflessly? Blood and water flowed from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus symbolizing the gift of life and the Spirit (19:34). Is not the crucified/glorified Jesus, the source of Spirit and life (7:37-39; 12:24), revealing himself through those who have become rivers of living water for others?

Jesus was crucified with two criminals outside the city of Jerusalem by the religio-political powers of his time. Calvary prefigures the fate of those (like Archbishop Romero) who are committed to the liberation of the downtrodden. But the resurrection of Jesus assures us that it is the crucified victims of our history that God vindicates. The seed that falls to the ground and dies is resurrected to bear abundant fruit (Jn. 12:24).

The risen Jesus draws near and walks with all those who are on the Emmaus-road of discouragement and despair after a shattering experience of the crucifixion of their hope on Calvary (Lk. 24:13-15). Like the Emmaus-disciples, we often fail to recognize him on the road (24:16). We are often too "foolish" and "slow of heart" (24:25-26) to believe in a Messiah suffering in the marginalized masses. But on recalling the episodes and reliving the experiences (often in the context of breaking the word of God and the Eucharistic bread: cf. 24:30-31) we feel the fire kindle in our hearts as the stranger walks and talks with us on the way (24:32).

Almost all the apparitions of the risen Jesus teach us the same lesson that he is savingly present wherever there is suffering, doubt, fear or despair. He is there outside all the tombs to meet the Mary Magdalenes weeping over the loss of their beloved ones (Jn. 20:11-18). He stands among all who for fear remain behind closed doors. He bestows on them his *shalom* (peace) and the Holy Spirit, and commissions them to continue his mission of reconciliation and integral liberation (20:19-23). He stands straight in front of all the doubting Thomases of

today showing his pierced hands and side and telling them to believe in the God who raises up the crucified: the slum-dwellers, the Dalits, the Tribals, the women, the unorganized labourers etc. (20:20-28). He stands on the shore of every Sea in which people labour in vain for long hours for a livelihood, to inspire them not to give up but to try again (21:1-8). He hides behind every caring mother and generous volunteer giving food to the hungry (21:9-14). He summons all the Simon Peters of today (the Christian leaders) who proclaim their love for him to show that love in action by feeding and tending his sheep (not only Christians but also others: cf. Jn. 10:16 "I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also..."') and by following him to Calvary to die for their cause (21:15-19). He meets the Marys of today (like the members of *mahila sangs* in the slums, the domestic working women) and tells them not to be afraid of the earthquake of opposition but to be messengers of hope for the shattered sisters and scattered brothers living in the slums and elsewhere in despair (Mt. 28:1-10). "I am with you always", the risen Jesus assures us (28:20). The privileged place of his presence in the world today is the poor, the underprivileged and the exploited who actually participate in his Paschal mystery of suffering and struggle for new life.

Jesus invites us to open our eyes of faith and to see him today especially among the last and the least in our society. Only if we open our hearts' eyes to the plight of the poor, will our eyes of faith be opened to recognize Jesus' presence in them. If we do, we too will be worthy to hear his words: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food..." (Mt. 25:34f). For "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14) and continues to live especially in the poor and the oppressed in our midst.

Vidyajyoti
23 Rajniwas Marg
Delhi 110 054

George Mlakuzhyil

God is Here

Sister Marie's is a personal account of conditions in the slums and of the effect involvement has on those who opt to struggle on the side of the dispossessed.

A long awaited dream of being with the poor became a reality for me when I could give my service for the people of Sanjay Amar Colony. The guiding force before me is none but Jesus the Master and Nano our Foundress.

Sanjay Amar Colony is a very big slum on the west bank of Yamuna, where thousands of human beings live without proper shelter, drinking water, toilets, drainage, roads or health facilities. Education has been totally neglected. These are a neglected lot both by the civic bodies and the bureaucratic government. People lack direction and education. To crown it all they are deeply divided and disunited. Many vested interests operate among them. These agents bank upon the powerlessness of these people. In such a climate many social evils like theft, smuggling, drug trafficking, alcoholism, trade of young girls are born and systematically maintained. In this process some of the slum dwellers themselves turn out to be oppressors.

In my involvement I have accomplished nothing in proportion to the enormous amount of work that needs attention. In the beginning I just visited the people, mainly women, in their *jhuggis* (huts) and listened to them. As time went on we became friends. Then the folk began to speak about things that matter to their life. They showed great unhappiness over crimes like wife beating, drinking habits, gambling, addiction to drugs and their side effects. Health problems among women were also an area of great concern for these women. This developing trend of friendliness and openness was a sign of hope for me.

The cheerfulness of these women is amazing. That they could, in the midst of abject poverty and want, remain so cheerful is an inspiration to me. Their capacity to endure pain is another factor that I could not get over. I remember a mother

watching over her sick child for days and nights. The little girl of two lay on the raw earth and the mother was squatting beside the child. There was nothing to call a *jhuggi*, except four poles and a bit of plastic thrown over them! The child suffered from malnutrition and lung infection. When I visited her the next day there was no child at all. She was dead and buried already. The mother was sad but I could see on her face a sign of relief. She is one of many such mothers left to themselves to bring up a couple of children without the assistance of their husbands. This woman and the kids were left behind when her husband was deported to Bangladesh. Often these poor creatures undergo torture from their drunken husbands, from want, and from abandonment. I have not heard them grumble even once. One is inclined to ask, "Has God forgotten these people?" Their misery after repeated fires that destroy every thing they have is vast. Yet their faith in the 'Ooperwala' (the one above) is unshakable. In bad days as well as good days they communicate this beautiful attitude.

The collaboration, participation and eagerness of the women of the *bastee* (colony) was very encouraging when we prepared for a women's day programme. They enacted their roles perfectly. There was no inhibition; rather, the enthusiasm was remarkable. They felt a sense of satisfaction and achievement.

They exhibit also a great sense of care and concern. A sort of oneness and solidarity has been born in them. When Sunitha was brutally beaten up by her husband the ladies from the adjoining *jhuggis* protected her and gave a good thrashing to Ashok her husband. This poor fellow left the place for shame and fear. Frequent fire is a common phenomenon in this slum. As a result people live in constant fear and insecurity. Many victims spend days without shelter in the bitter cold. Nobody has as yet found a solution to this problem. Suicides are a common occurrence here among women. Kukumuni mother of two little girls immolated herself [it is said] recently to save her dignity as a woman when she was harassed and threatened by a man. She had already gone through the nightmare of losing her husband who eloped with another woman. The orphaned children have been rescued from being sold for Rs. 5000. Their so-called guardians were trying to sell them. Today these children enjoy their childhood in an Ashram.

A sad thing happened to an eight year old girl. She was brutally raped and abandoned on the bank of Yamuna. We re-named this little girl Gudiya because we could not get her real name out of her. She spoke not a word: she was feeble and shock-ridden. On account of this people said she was mad. Gudiya was found unconscious on the river bank by a young man who claimed that he owned her. The news spread that a girl had been raped. A few women contacted the girl. She was semi-conscious, profusely bleeding. The women took the girl to L. N. J. P. Hospital. The hospital authorities took no notice of the case in the absence of an F. I. R. (First Information Report). When the police was approached they laughed and said, "why are you fussing so much? this is a common thing" !

It was then I came to know about it. Immediately I went to the bastee and located the girl. I made umpteen attempts to shift the girl to a hospital, but in vain. The young man acted hysteric! We really believed that he was the culprit. Four of us set out seeking assistance. Some people advised us to approach the police again. Even though the police was well aware of the facts, they pretended not to know anything. The officer incharge agreed to come along after listening to us. But then he sided with the young man and asked us, "why do you want to take her to a hospital?" and then he added that home treatment was perfectly alright. This was another indication that he was not going to register a case. At this I lost patience and demanded immediate hospitalisation of the girl or else we would take the case to the higher authorities. Then he asked us to wait until the next day for it was already 9.30 p. m.

On my return home I contacted D. C. P. for crime against women. She took up the issue and ordered immediate registration and hospitalisation of the victim. The following morning when I visited the slum the child had already been shifted to Hindu Rao Hospital.

A vicious circle is created by flesh trade; it is a subtle business which operates through a well established net-work. Girls from Bangladesh are brought here and their systematic supply is done from this slum. Men mint money and become oppressors. Nobody can stop this ugly transaction as long as the police are hand in hand with these criminals. This sort of

thing frustrates me. I wonder why is God so silent? Then I seem to hear a voice saying, You are to be my mouthpiece, I want you to respond, as I responded to the Pharisees and Scribes.

My one and a half years of close contact with the people of this slum has offered me a vast amount of valuable lessons and blessings — it made me to realise the enormity of human misery that exists. It provided me with first hand knowledge of slums where thousands struggle for a livelihood. It opened my heart to love the poor ever more deeply; my initial aversion of stepping into dirt and touching the ill clad and dirty babies has disappeared. Later on sipping tea with them and squatting among them became a regular and ordinary thing for me! I began to see Christ in the dark realities of the life of these people. Their problems became my problems. To solve them we began to think together, talk and plan together. This communion of people began to give more meaning to my encounter with the Lord even in the Eucharist.

Today I feel I can put up with inconveniences better. My attitude towards persons has changed; there developed in my heart greater concern and compassion. I gained courage to oppose openly any injustice and unjust systems. I owe all this to the poor and the constant contact with Jesus in the poor. The small successes and the people's acceptance of me are a visible sign of God's unfailing support and presence among us. I believe that He stands by and struggles with us.

I feel what St. Paul told the Philippians holds good today in the lives of the people of Sanjay Amar Colony. He told them, 'His state was divine yet He did not cling to His equality with God, but emptied Himself to assume the condition of a slave and became as men are.' He dwelt among the poor. He chose the weakest and humblest to be His friends.

Therefore, a God who is passionately in love with the human race cannot be silent or absent where men and women struggle for mere existence. On the contrary He is in the heart of the struggle and in the midst of the struggling people — the poor.

Presentation Convent
S. P. Mukherji Marg
Delhi-110 006.

Marie Mathew

Master, Where Do You Live?

"I believe in a million Christ"!

At a consultation on "The Theological and Ideological Basis of Christian Social Action" held in January 1991 at UTC, (United Theological College) Bangalore, I made a rather blasphemous statement that "I don't believe in One God". That did it! However, with the presence of some progressive theologians, the discussion turned into a creative concern to understand the theological position of an activist. I made the following statement then, which is probably how I would like to sum up my experience of encounter with Christ in day-to-day working.

I don't believe in *One Christ*! I think, I believe in a *Million Christ*!! Millions of Christ, who are suffering and struggling in the world to re-build it. The real life of the people with all its ups and downs, does represent one level of reality of Christ—the human Christ living in inhumanity, yet, struggling to become the ideal Christ living with all, in human conditions and community. All the people, who have chosen to create such a situation, represent the Church, a gathering of multitudes not sitting with folded hands in prayer to see a miracle, but participating in bearing the brunt of humanity for a better life, fighting the forces of death and destruction with all their might.

It is only when Christ merges with the masses, mingles with the masses, is murdered with the masses that the reality of Christ emerges in the form of a God. But, this creates yet another problem for us.

The image of God as al mighty is not true. I think we have to do away with the *Centralized God*. What we need is a Decentralized God. We need to decentralize the power of God.

The people have problems because of this traditional image of God as a Centralized Power-structure. All the time people are, in history and even today, looking for a God to guide them,

to lead them, to liberate them, to provide them with the *Manna* of life. The philosophy of a Divine person with all the powers to deliver the goods is in-built in the "Welfarism approach" that we, in the churches and countries, have been practising and promoting. Thus, the people are made to wait with folded hands in prayer for the all-mighty to deliver the goods! A social activist, a trade unionist, a politician, a bureaucrat, a religious head, and a development worker, all are, thus, looked upon by the people as "gods" who will deliver the goods, and lead them to the path of prosperity and peace!! Thus, people are forced to reduce themselves into "the recipients", "the beggars" and "no-bodies" in this process. The people's participation in shaping their own destiny is, thus, destroyed.

The need today is to destroy the image of a *centralized God* which is, unfortunately, being consciously built-up by all those who believe in centralized authority, who want to control people, who want to remain in high-heavens, and "let people go to hell"!

Only then will the "People" resurrect. Only then will the *Million Christ* become real and live in the lives of the resurrected people.

"Heavenly Father or Earthly Mother"

From the early childhood, they created an image of God as the "Heavenly Father". But, the ground reality is that in my day-to-day encounter I kept discovering My Lord as the "Earthly Mother". Being wedded to a woman, who has been struggling to discover her own identity as a creature of God, I was helped at every step to re-discover My Lord as an "Earthly Mother".

From the Sunday School teacher to the Church Leader, all built up a God for me who had, to my horror I found out, nothing to do with the people I chose to work with later in my life. The Church building, its inside decoration, the god's official representatives in this world, the padris and pastorates, the hymns and prayers, the pews and pulpits all created the myth of the "Heavenly Father".

Un-fortunately for me, with all the conservatism that lower-middle class christianity consisted of in the days of my early childhood, the "father figure" was that of an authority that was absolute and un-challenged; that of an exercise of force to

discipline the rest of the family; that of one who lived in the house but maintained a distance so much so that any contact with him was rather too official and formal! And, looking at other "fathers" around, the very term "Heavenly Father" injected fear and formality in me. The trend continued upto the days of my youth, and I failed to find the presence of "Heavenly Father" in the factories and fields, in the slums and villages, in forests and mountains, in homes and shops.

The wall-hanging in every christian home reading: *Christ is the head of this house, the silent listener to every conversation, the unseen guest at every meal*, also highlighted the confusion of christian faith in my mind. I was always told that "father" was the head of the family. But, in reality, I kept finding my "mother" running the family with all the "cross" her role laid on her shoulders!

For me, the "heaven" then comprised of trees and tricks, plants and ponds, singing and dancing, dust and dawn, friends and family. But, the "heaven" that fathers created consisted of schools and books, rules and regulations, morals and mythology, discipline and duty, work and worship. As a child it confused me more.

Several experiences and encounters with My Lord as the "Earthly Mother" can be shared. To recount a few here, would probably bring home the point.

I was born and brought up in a town famous as the "sangam" of Ganges and Yamuna rivers — Prayag (Allahabad). The Christian Villa (as the half-slum and half-village of christians was known in Naini — a growing industrial town at the outskirts of Allahabad) would get flooded for almost a month or so every year during monsoon. People's homes would be drowned, their belongings had to be bailed out. They had to be provided with shelter during the flood. The Church building with its basement and varandah was the only place equipped to shelter the victims of flood. But, the Church Leaders would never permit it, as the people — inclusive of all creed — would defile the Heavenly Father's abode! As young people and others argued in favour of, at least, opening the varandah and basement for women and children, the protectors of purity of the religious place permitted only the christian women and

children to take shelter in the open varandah during the difficult days of continuous rain and flood. Children of God were denied the comfort of the "heaven"; continued to peril in hell!! These arguments confused me more about the image of God as a "Heavenly Father"!!

In 1987, the Good Friday and Id fell on the same day. That year, I was also arrested on cooked-up criminal charges — including one of threatening to kill a police officer. The previous day, I had joined the slum-dwellers in defeating the demolition of their huts by the Municipal Corporation, late in the night. The demolition squad had to lick the dust in the face of people's united protest to protect their huts and shops. The next day, the police arrested me on trumped up charges. The slum-dwellers stood by me in solidarity, and region-wide protest was organized. I was released on bail. This was the first time I was arrested in Raipur city. The Church Leaders got nervous and embarrassed. No one uttered a word in protest, nor came to visit me during my detention. But, this was not unusual. I had not expected support and solidarity from such a quarter. What happened then and thereafter is worth recounting to understand the significance of the "Eucharist" joining in the pains and suffering of the people of God: *Samvedna* (feeling).

This particular slum has a few families of Muslims, who have been living there for years alongside the dalit Hindus. They had invited my wife and me to join them at the Id celebrations. But, the day being Good Friday, we could visit the slum only in the late afternoon — just after the three-hour noon service during which we were engrossed in singing sad songs, tearful prayers, and sad commentaries on the seven golden sayings of Christ on the Cross.

Although we were quite late for the celebrations, we found out that each family was waiting for us to join in the celebrations. It was quite a contrast from the just concluded three-hours Good Friday Service in the Church! On that day we, christians, are supposed to be fasting, sharing in the Eucharist. But, seeing the love of the people — old and young, men and women — we gave in to share a spoonful of sweet *simwai* (a traditional dish famous for Id) brought from each one of about thirty houses of muslims. The others — dalit Hindus — also joined in the

celebrations. It turned out to be probably the best "Eucharist" we ever had in our life. The significance of "breaking and sharing the bread" as the "body of Christ" and "drinking the wine" as reminder of the "blood of Jesus which has been shed for all people's health and happiness" dawned on us through this experience.

While we were walking home after this experience, both of us realized that neither the community in which we shared the experience was by faith a christian community, nor the occasion of the festival was with the sadness and tragedy of Good Friday. The "bread and wine" were replaced by "simwai and sharbat". There were neither *padris* nor *mullahs*! But, it became symbolic of sharing in the pain and suffering of the struggling people — a people who were fighting to protect their life and livelihood, a people who carry their cross daily. That is where we found out Christ as the "Earthly Mother". We thought also of the three-hour noon worship we had a few hours earlier with fellow-believers, and that too on a fasting stomach in the Church!! We could not help but compare the experience of fellowship with the different communities.

My Christ got lost in the crowd!

My Christ got lost in the crowd of struggling people. He has mingled with the people, fused into the masses. He does not seek a separate identity, but we are the ones who are always trying to identify Christ among the masses of struggling people. Whenever any recognition-attempt was made on Christ, to single Him out, to hold Him out as a separate identity, He just vanished from the scene. Whenever people wanted to glorify Him, crown Him King, He ran away from them. The only place where he stands identified, where he stands out prominently, is on the Cross. Ironically, at that moment, most of the people who wanted to crown Him King, had left Him, and run away from Him!

At times, I find myself confessing Christ without the use of words, in silent, low-profile action. At times, I am not even aware of confessing Christ. The same is true with other christian activists. A new kind of "spirituality for combat" is being experienced by the action groups. The significance of the "Cross" in their lives — both individually and collectively — has

become a living experience for them. The Cross symbolizes betrayal by those who were, at times, close to you; insult and abuse by those in power; the crowd leaves you or is turned against you; those in authority shirk their responsibility and adopt an indifferent attitude under public pressure; finally you feel so lonely that it seems as though God has left you!

Mayadhar Bariha, a tribal whose ancestors were the rulers of the region in earlier times, was in bondage for three generations for a paltry sum of Rs. 200. And that too with a Brahmin family which had produced two generations of MLAs from the Basna Constituency of Raipur District in Chattisgarh, known as "the rice bowl". He worked for ten to sixteen hours a day for only two *tamis* (i.e., one and a half kgs of paddy). There was no respite for them from the bondage, and they were condemned for generations. The system was so powerful and had political protection that it was difficult even to attend meetings, or to declare oneself as a *kamiya* during government surveys. The State Government has been declaring this region a bonded labour-free zone for years. Mayadhar had neither heard of the Constitutional Rights nor the Act, which was ironically passed in Parliament when his Master, Laxman Satpathy, was the MLA and his party — Congress (I) — was in power in the Centre and the State.

Mayadhar was identified as one of the 4000 *kamiyas* (as the agricultural bonded labourers were called in common parlance) by the social activists. The government refused to take it as truth, and the social activists, had no other option but to knock at the doors of the highest court of justice in India. Mayadhar was produced before the Supreme Court of India to testify to the tale of slavery on the eve of 21st century, when the national leaders were introducing computers in the country. The Writ Petition was admitted. Mayadhar returned to his native village, Toshgaon, with some hope. That was in April, 1986!

This was the first time that Mayadhar had ever spoken about the misery of his likes. When we moved into the area in early 1983, it was difficult even to hold meetings. The rich landlords, in a criminal combine with the bureaucrats and politicians had built such a notorious net-work of exploitation, that it was

difficult to penetrate the wall of slavery. The level of backwardness and lack of consciousness was such that the bonded labourers owed their allegiance to the 'masters'. You can well imagine that the majority of them had never seen a train. They were afraid to walk on the roads in the cities. They lived in a 'culture of silence', and followed the *mai-bap* philosophy.

Mayadhar had gone to raise the voice of the voiceless in the highest seat of justice. He was produced before the press in New Delhi, which printed his story and photograph on the front pages. His name was now known in each household of the region. But, the landlords mocked him: "Have you brought freedom in your bag from Delhi? Did the judges give you enough to eat?" He was nick-named "Dilli Return" by the landlords and officials. For the rich and powerful, he became an object of ridicule and rejection. For he had dared to challenge their authority. But, Mayadhar went around the villages talking to other *kamiyas* of the hope he had nursed after fighting for a better future for themselves, their fellow-kamiyas and their children. He talked of unity and organization.

Very often, I was asked what the bonded labourers had gained. It is true that they lost their security of even a regular meal — although consisting of only rice-water — and were hunted like dogs by the landlords throughout the region. No one offered them work for fear of retaliation by the rich farmers; even the shop-keepers in the village would refuse to sell them goods on payment, leave aside on credit. False criminal cases were registered against their leaders, but they refused to be defeated in their resolve to achieve freedom from the age-old slavery.

When I was sitting on an indefinite hunger-strike in November, 1988, pressing for the rehabilitation of released bonded labourers, someone from the press put me a question: What have these released bonded labourers gained? I reminded him of those who still speak with nostalgia of the "British Raj" when things were cheaper, and the administration was good. Does it mean that we call back the "Britishers" to take over our country once again? Economically, the bonded labourers have definitely not gained anything, but freedom from slavery is what they fought for. One released bonded labourer summed up the whole struggle in a simple sentence: "Earlier we had to run at the beck and call of the Master. We had to leave food on the plate

and run for work if the Master summoned us. Now we are free to go to work whenever we want to; and rest when we want to. The Master cannot abuse us, cannot beat us. Now, I look him in the face, and call him by name. He has no power and authority over me. I have no fear of him" !

From a state of inhuman existence, they marched down the long road to freedom from darkness. After five years of long and bitter battle in the courts and on the streets, 3946 *kamiyas* got an order from the Supreme Court on 14th April, 1988. Never before, so many slaves were freed with a stroke of the pen; and that too from one single district in a country which had claimed that there were no bonded labourers left now. Mayadhar's hope had been partially realized. He gained a new identity.

The journey from bondage to freedom taught them (and us) many a lesson. Today, they are united, powerful, can shout slogans, fight against any form of oppression, stand in a police station and file an FIR; talk to the Collector, chase the contractors out of the forests, hold people's *panchayats* against corrupt officials; beat the goondas and smash the liquor shops, join hands with the industrial workers and peasants in the area to fight for a New Chattisgarh, for a New India. They can fight any issue now from Dunkel to Dowry! A New community has emerged out of this struggle for Right to Freedom and Dignity. A New Church has emerged out of the sharing in the pain and suffering of each other; *Samvedna* is the Theme of this New Church emerging into a people's movement.

The people have gained a new identity. From 'nobodies' they have now become 'somebodies'. They can raise their voices honestly and participate in shaping their life and the life of the village community around them. They carry red-green flags on their bi-cycles with pride and hoist it on their roofs. They wear red-green dress in public places and processions. They have been unionized now. Today it is one of the largest trade union of agricultural workers in Chattisgarh, with some 15,000 members. This is probably the first time that the released bonded labourers have been unionized, and have taken over the leadership among the poor and oppressed to fight the forces of death and destruction. They are now part and parcel of a

strong political movement under the leadership of Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha, whose leader, Comrade Shanker Guha Niyogi, was assassinated by the criminal combine of industrialists-bureaucrats-politicians on 28th September, 1990, because he had chosen to be on the side of the poor and oppressed. Their social reform struggles have brought into their fold many middle-class people, specially lower level government employees, teachers and students. The anti-liquor campaign, status of women in family and society, fight against social evils such as dowry, are part of their New Life Movement. They sing new songs, create new dramas around the lives of the local martyrs and freedom fighters, and defeat the draconian designs of the oppressors. Their efforts to sustain them economically by reviving village trades and crafts are also unique experiments in the field. They are making soap units jointly run by about 50 families. The names of the soaps — *Mashal* (flame), *Kranti* (revolution), *Mukti* (liberation) represent their strong political commitments. Their fight to create a place in the market for their products has upset many commercial combines of soap industries in the region.

For the last two years they raised a new slogan: *Zamin ka faisla zamin par hoga* (land issue will be settled on the land itself). Which means that they will neither go to the courts, where they are dragged for settling land disputes for generations, nor will they believe in the records of the *patwaris*. They discovered a unique way of settling the land disputes. The landless would sit on a *dharna* on the disputed land. It is the officials who have to come to the land and, in the presence of village folks — who have the factual information about the piece of land — settle the dispute. Last year, in furtherance of their land struggles — which carries much meaning in their lives as the mother earth and giver of life and liberty — they raised yet another slogan: *Zamin do ya jail do* (give us land or jail). Thousands went to jail. The government had to bow down and start listening to the people's cry for: *Jal, jangal aur zamin yeh ho janta ke adhin* (water, forest and land, all these must come under the direct control of the community).

The theme of the people's organisation is: *Development through struggles for justice; struggles on the basis of people's development* will take them further into new areas of living with dignity, in peace and freedom.

It looks like a rosy picture. No, it is not. It is red and green. The colour of the flag they have chosen for their organisation. The red symbolizes their blood which falls on the ground in the form of sweat due to hard labour. Only then the land becomes green. Green represents fuller life, joy and hope, prosperity and peace. The red symbolizes blood, which flows through the wounds created by the bullets of the tyrants. It is not different from the blood which flowed out of the wounds of My Christ who died on the cross some 2000 years ago on the hills of Middle-East. It also represents the blood of all those who died for a cause, the blood of all martyrs which has been shed for all of us—a continuation of the blood from the cross on the calvary; a stream of life in its fullness.

Slogans of a new Church — a people's movement

The level of liveliness of a movement is judged probably by the slogans it raises in the midst of the struggles for justice, peace, love and freedom. It may be a quite interesting task to find out the slogans that the Church has raised from time to time. What are the new slogans that the Christian Church has raised in its journey for establishing the Kingdom of God on this Earth? A movement dies if it fails to raise new slogans, and live upto them.

In the midst of the people's movement, new slogans are being raised. One may like to understand the theological basis of these slogans which are being raised today by the people themselves. It may be appropriate to recount some here with the hope that someone will try to point out the theology of slogans.

“Kamane wala khayega, lootne wala jayega, naya zamana ayega”
(All those who toil hard will eat the fruits of their labour. All those who exploit/loot will vanish into thin air. Then only will the new era be ushered in !)

“Shaheedon ki kurbani vyanth na jayegi, azadi ki mashal bujhne na payegi”

(The martyrdom of the martyrs will not go waste, the flame of freedom cannot be extinguished).

“Jal, jangal aur zamin, yeh hon janata ke adhin”

(Water, forest and land, all this must come under people's control).

"Sashan wale sun lo aj, hamar gaon men hamar raj"
(The rulers must listen today, our rule in our village).

"Har zor zulm ki takkar men, sangharsh hamara nara hai"
(Against all use of authority and injustices, our slogan is struggle).

"Nari sharir par atyachar, nahin sahenge, nahin sahenge"
(We shall not tolerate any violence on women).

"Chattisgarh ki nari hai, phool nahin chingari hai"
(We are the women of Chattisgarh, we are not flowers but flames).

"Har hath ko kam do, har khet ko pani do"
(Give work to each hand, give water to each field).

One could go on and on. But some home work must be left for those who are keen to learn from the slogans of the people's movements today, specially from the theological point of view! So I will close here.

But, this sharing will be incomplete if I do not raise the fundamental question of faith in the people—people who are considered illiterates, lazy, drunkards, living like animals and insects. I would like to point out three movements from Madhya Pradesh, which have demonstrated the faith in people's capacity to stand up against the demonic forces, and keep burning the torch of freedom, truth, love and justice in the midst of hopelessness.

The Bhopal Gas Victims have been fighting for ten years now. For what? The Narmada Valley people have been fighting for almost the same years? Why? The Bhilai Industrial Workers have been laying down their lives for five years now? For whom?

Interestingly, these three struggles of the people are the talk of the country today. Symbolically, it is between the mighty and the lowly. In Bhopal, you will find the giant of a Multi-national Corporation—Union Carbide—on the one side. Lined behind it is the state power and money power. All are jointly protecting the right to destroy life and environment. On the other side are the victims of Bhopal Tragedy. Interestingly, they are represented in the *burga-clad muslim women*, who had not been permitted under their religious rituals to come out of their homes. But, these are the very women who have been in the fore-front of the struggle for justice against the might of the MNCs. They have not lost hope; even when they have not been given relief, leave aside justice, in spite of all the court cases, our government is fighting on their behalf.

Then, you see the *langoti clad adivasis* in the 'Narmada Valley, whose very existence, their very culture and history is threatened by the so-called development of a Dam, supported by giants like the World Bank, the builders/contractors, and politicians and bureaucrats. On the other side, a frail looking woman, Medha Patkar, and literally a bone-and skin social worker, Baba Amte, represent the reality of the people — the meek against the mighty.

Similarly, in Bhilai, you find the industrialists flouting the labour laws of the land, lined up behind the Liquor Mafia of Madhya Pradesh, and using their might to crush the genuine workers' movement for the right to life and livelihood. The labour leader, Shanker Guha Niyogi, was brutally murdered. The Bharatiya Janata Party in power in 1992 fired on the peacefully agitating workers in Bhilai, killing 16 and injuring 153. About 5000 industrial workers have been victimized for three years now, simply because they demanded the implementation of the labour laws of our land.

Their interests, their rights, their jobs, their homes, their forests, their dignity, their freedom, their lives and liberty, are not being protected by those whose business it is to do so. But, the powerless are giving the fight of their life to the powerful. The small and the lowly are challenging the might of the giants. The Davids versus Goliaths; Using simple techniques, simple formulas, simple strategies to protect their lives, given to them by their Creator, which, no power on this earth has the right to take away. The Saviour of their lives is themselves, their united strength, their beliefs in their organisations, themselves, their own resources.

In such situations, we confront God as "Earthly Mother". Among such people, we find our Christ moving in spirit. It is in the midst of their struggles for retaining and regaining humanity that we find life after death: real resurrection after the death on the cross. The question therefore is: Can any form of death other than that on the Cross lead us to new life? Why did Christ tell us to carry our own Cross and follow him? The answers to these questions probably hold the key to true christianity !

Master, Where Do You Live?

One

We are God-seekers. (Some of us, no doubt, are self-seekers, or great eaters, or worshippers of the market, or mammon's minions, or nuclear power addicts.) We seek the Divine in the wonders of nature, in the marvels of history, in the cave of the heart, in hectic activity, in silence, in sacred ritual, in authority figures, in holy scriptures, in ascetics and saints, in prayers and *bhajans*, in gurus and guides, in temples, images, pilgrimages, or in legal and dogmatic rigidities and pieties. But where is the living God really present and active on our behalf? Where does the divine make itself accessible to us? Where are we likely to meet our God? Where should we be looking for our Lord?

The Gospels document many a sacred quest (and some profane ones too), which could possibly throw light on our own search. When the angel of the Good News withdrew, the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem and see the event which the Lord had made known to them. They sought their Saviour, that joy of the whole people. And they found a Baby lying in a manger. No formality, no protocol, no solemnity, no symbols of power. That precisely was the sign the angel had given of the presence of God's salvation incarnate in history: a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. That perhaps is not what the shepherds had expected; God surprised them (Lk. 2:8-12).

The next seekers were wise men from the East. A star had signalled to them the birth of the King of the Jews. So they were now in Jerusalem, come to pay homage to the infant King. To their amazement the ruling monarch, the crowned and sworded Herod, knew nothing about a new King's birth and was upset by the news. Instructed however by scribes and led by the star, the wise men found the child and his mother Mary. A modest house; again, no display of pomp and power. God was shattering our pyramid of values, and driving a point home (Mt. 2:1-12).

When Mary's Child was presented in the temple, two old people, Simeon and Anna, came in, recognising in the Babe the

arrival of Israel's restoration and Jerusalem's deliverance, despite the fact that the offerings Mary made were of the poor, and the prediction Simeon had to make about the Child spelt out opposition, and that about his Mother pointed to a sword piercing her soul. In what sort of a world, then, are we encountering the saving presence? (Lk. 2:22-38).

A little later it was the lot of his parents to look for the boy Jesus and worry trying to find him. They found him in the temple which was already shaking with his questions and his answers and which in his eyes was being a den of thieves, already on the point of abolition, with not a single stone left on another, and of replacement with worship in spirit and in truth. (Lk. 2:41-50; cf. Mk. 13:1-2; Jn. 4:19-24).

Two

Those were the beginnings. Then all the years of Jesus' ministry were a Jesus-ward flow of people: of the sick, the broken and the excluded and of the possessed and the deranged — all seeking liberation, healing and wholeness; of sinners seeking pardon and peace; of women and men longing to hear Jesus' word or wanting to be his disciples; but also of critics and opponents trying to trip him up in words and looking for a chance to destroy him (see Mt. 4:23-25; 5:1, 8:1-2; 9 the whole of it; Lk. 6:17-19; 7 all of it; 8:40-56...).

It is the fourth Gospel that pays special attention to the flow of people towards Jesus and to Jesus as life's destination. It makes the cosmos and (Jewish) history and all peoples converge on Jesus (ch. 1). Two of the Baptist's disciples follow Jesus, put him the question, Teacher, where do you live?, receive the invitation, 'Come and see', and having seen, stay with him. One of them Andrew, brings his brother Simon to Jesus. Philip was directly called, and Philip takes his friend Nathanael to Jesus, and this man becomes a follower though Jesus is from Nazareth from where, according to popular prejudice, nothing good could come (Jn. 1:36-47).

Not long after, Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews and a teacher in Israel, seeks out Jesus by night to be told to his surprise that his religion and spirituality had to undergo radical renewal and rebirth (Jn. 3:1-10). After that comes a Samaritan woman to a well where Jesus sat resting. The encounter

results in the women's magnificent faith-response and discipleship upon which she goes and leads the whole of her village to Jesus, the Messiah she had discovered so unexpectedly, in those most unlikely of circumstances (Jn. 4).

By now large crowds follow Jesus: impressed by the signs he gives, experiencing healing at his hands, drawn by the beauty of his words, and having been fed by him, they pursue him (Jn. 6:2, 24-25). During the feast of the Shelters, the Jews were on the look out for Jesus, asking 'Where is he?' (Jn. 7:11). Even after attempts to arrest Jesus or to stone him to death (Jn. 5:18; 7:30, 32, 44, 45-52; 8:20, 37, 40, 59; 10:31; 11:47-54, 57), many people came to him and believed in him, or were looking out for him (10:41-42; 11:55-56).

When Lazarus of Bethany is ill, his sisters Mary and Martha turn to Jesus (11:3-4). On the occasion of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem crowds come out to welcome him (Jn. 12:17-18); and some Greeks came, too, bent on seeing Jesus (12:20-21). After that Jesus repeats to his followers the warning he had already given to hostile Jews: that the hour was coming when they would look for him but not be able to reach where he was going: (never for the Jews, for a while for the disciples). (18:33; cf. 8:21; 7:34,36). In the garden in the Kedron valley a disciple comes to betray Jesus, and the police to arrest him (18:1-5). His Mother stood by his cross, and when he died, Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus came to take him from the cross and bury him (19:38-42). Mary of Magdala comes early on the third day to offer at his tomb her love and her tears. Told by her of the open and empty tomb, Peter and John come running to it and returned pensive. But in the vicinity of the tomb, in the region of death, the weeping woman encounters her Lord, alive and beautiful (Jn. 20:1-18).

Thomas missed Jesus' first paschal reunion with his disciples. He insisted on meeting his Lord personally, and not only in the testifying words of his friends. He would touch Jesus' wounds, and have his resurrection faith spring fresh from that physical contact. And that precisely was the grace Jesus granted him (Jn. 20:24-29).

To our question, 'Master, where do you live?' his reply is, come and see. The reply resounds from places of lowly birth,

and mangers, and dalit conditions; it echoes from the midst of afflicted and broken people; it rings from hearts which love and grieve, and seek wholeness, and seek the God of Life.

Three

But God also is a seeker. God is a world-seeker. Creation is a divine way of seeking and finding us in the first place. Then, according to one of the Genesis traditions, when the Human had lost itself by cutting itself off from the will that had loved it into beautiful community existence, God came looking for them, crying, "Earthlings, where are you?" (Gn. 3:9). In that voice was concern, and a touch of pain. When the older and stronger brother destroyed the younger and weaker one, the one considered worthless (Abel), God comes again, looking for the lost, and asking, "Where is your brother?" In that voice was a touch of tears. And if the killer (like all killers, primitive as well as post-modern) does not care and refuses to be brother's keeper, God would make himself brother and keeper of all the little ones that need to be affirmed and supported (Gn. 4:3-12). Accordingly, when refugees and migrant workers are oppressed in Egypt and are condemned to eventual extinction, God goes out looking for them: looking for children abandoned among the reeds of the Nile valley; for leaders capable of anger and action against oppression. God appears to them, addressing them from within the flames of suffering and anger raging in their hearts. God said:

I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt.
I have heard them crying for help...
I am aware of their sufferings. And
I have come down to rescue them...So now
I am sending you...to bring my people...out of Egypt...
I shall be with you... (Exod. 3:1-12).

The Bible is the story of God's search for a lost world to redeem it, God's pursuit of self-hurting peoples to save them. When Israel became captive a second time in the new Egypt of Babylon God sets out to liberate and restore them. Second Isaiah portrays for us a God who seeks the lost and bears on his heart the weak and the afflicted.

Here comes your God...
like a shepherd he tends his flock,

he gathers the lambs in his arms,
 he carries them in his bosom
 and gently leads the ewes that are with young (Isa 40:9-11).

Similarly Hosea knows God as a Mother and a Lover who pursues the erring Love, blocks her path, allures her, leads her into the desert where she will be spoken to tenderly till she should freely decide to return to God and definitively belong with Life (Hos. 2 and 11).

It is this divine search for a lost world and concern for wounded humanity that became historically embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus knew it; it was his deepest identity. He said he came to call not the respectable people but those treated as outcasts and sinners (Mk. 2:13-17; Mt. 9:13). He told beautiful stories emphasizing the truth that God is in history active to seek and save the lost: the lost sheep, the lost jewel, the lost child (Lk. 15; cf. Mt. 10:5). That is why, in the Gospel narrative, Jesus is found most of the time where the lost and the lowliest are: in the company of little ones, of fishworkers, of women and children, of despised tax collectors and prostitutes; of the afflicted, the sick and the broken; and of the victims of imperial and patriarchal systems of oppression. With these is God-in-Christ solidary. And that solidarity is the basis of all further liberative action. It is itself the first act of liberation-salvation: this taking over and appropriation by the Son of God of the common people's oppressed condition.

An ancient christian creed, cited by Paul in Philippians, affirms divine solidarity with despised humans in touching terms of self-emptying, slave condition and crucifixion (Phil. 2:5-11). The letter to the Hebrews too spells it out in graphic language: Jesus was made completely like us, capable of feeling our weaknesses with us, put to the test in exactly the same way as ourselves, apart from sin; offering up prayers and entreaty with loud cries and tears; winning a hearing by his reverence; learning obedience through his sufferings, and made perfect through pain (Heb. 4:15, 5:7-10; 2:10-18). John's gospel sums it up by saying that the Word of God became "flesh", that is, someone belonging with the weak and powerless social sector. Therefore he received little recognition from the world he had made himself; he came to his own and his own did not accept him (Jn.

1:9-14). The world did not know him though it had its origin in him. So insignificant and statusless was he in his society.

It must be with all this in view that the letter to the Hebrews closes with a radical summons:

the bodies of animals whose blood is taken into the sanctuary... are burnt outside the camp... and so Jesus suffered outside the gate... let us go to him, then, outside the camp and bear his humiliation/share his shame (Heb. 13:11-13).

Outside the camp and the gate, outside the village is precisely where Dalits are confined and forced to live. Outside the system of power and privilege are the vast masses of the people forcibly consigned to wretched existence. That is where Jesus lives and moves, and can be met: in the company of untouchables and Dalits, the disinherited and the despised. Jesus is flesh of their flesh.

Four

The passage from Hebrews is telling us that Jesus made his own the degradation and death of the people. It is in their midst that Jesus can be met. To this death-text corresponds the Lukan story of Jesus' birth. Mary laid her first-born in a manger. There was no room for them in the inn. Much less in the governor's house. Less still in the imperial palace. And the emperor is named in the story. Thus a sharp and stunning contrast is achieved between Rome and Bethlehem, Caesar and Mary's Babe, palace and manger, power and powerlessness. It is in the lowliness of the manger and of Mary that the encounter with Jesus happens, not in the imperial capital with its luxury, power and pride.

Significantly then the news of the Messiah's birth is shared not with the mighty and the rich but with one of the most despised sectors of society, the shepherds, commonly looked on as an impure herd of thieves. That tallies with the blessing bestowed on the poor and the offer of the Kingdom to the deprived. It squares with the thanks Jesus offered to God

"for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children." (Lk. 10:21; 6:20-26; Mt. 11:25; cf. Mt. 13:11; Jn. 7:45-52).

Matthew has also the same perspective from the beginning of his work. A contrast is established at the start, the impact of which is felt throughout the Gospel. God is with us in, as,

a child who has to flee for life in the face of death unleashed by King Herod who is power, sword and death. The Christ of God is to be sought not among throned and crowned might decreeing massacres and bloodshed, but among the refugees and the victims of arrogant power (Mt. 2:13-18). Towards the end of Matthew's gospel, in a passage disclosing the eschatological/definitive criteria for the evaluation of history, Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless, all the broken people, and the jailed poor.

"What you do to the least of my brothers/sisters, you do to me." (25:31-45) Jesus is one with the victims of our unjust socio-economic systems; he is *the* victim. We encounter him savingly when we relate to victims through services of justice and love.

But God in Christ comes to us not only in the victims and in his solidarity with them; he comes especially in every intervention to liberate the victims. Luke stresses this truth in the opening chapter of his gospel. In the song which he and the early church placed on Mary's lips God is proclaimed as Someone who is actively subversive not only of our values but of structures and systems which create and maintain poverty and wretchedness. God acts and

"routs the arrogant of heart, pulls down princes from their thrones, sends the rich empty away, but fills the starving with good things and raises high those that are lowly." (2:51-53) That is what God does. That is Who God is. The proclamation is also a summons to us to side with God in this subversive-transformative, new-creative activity. It is within that process that the Christ is encountered and experienced as God's saving Grace.

Jesus was himself destined for the fall of many a throne and crown as well as for the rise of many a lowly woman and broken man (Lk 2:54). He comes as a force and ferment of radical change and the creator of reversals and new social relations. His mission, symbolically portrayed as the kingdom of God, is historically described in biblical terms as liberative action. Jesus declares that God has anointed him with the Spirit and the Power and sent him

- to bring to the afflicted and the dispossessed news which they can experience as good and hopeful and life-giving;

- to abolish prisons and proclaim liberty to captives;
- to give sight to the blind and enable the blindfolded and the brainwashed and the mentally colonised to see reality in perspective;
- to set the downtrodden free, and
- to proclaim a new era of grace and freedom and fellowship as a gift from the Lord (cf Lk 4:18-19; Is 61:1-2).

That is the movement Jesus initiates for us to join in. Wherever this liberative action shapes up and develops, wherever its price is paid in a baptism of sweat, suffering and blood, there Jesus our Saviour is present. There, within freely offered collaboration in the work of renewing the world, Jesus is met.

Five

We seek God and his Christ.

We keep asking, Master, where do you live?

And we hear his unfailing reply: Come and see.

Come to the manger;

come to my Mother's lowly home.

Come with the shepherds and the wise men from the east.

Come to the temple in the company of Simeon and Anna.

Come and see

that while birds have nests and foxes have holes,

the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

Come and see how,

when you gave shelter to the homeless and food to the hungry,

it was me you homed and fed, and met in depth.

Come and see, he said,

and he took us to the slums of the city

with their stench and squalor and misery, and children's laughter.

He took us to the villages and peasant homes

and bade us see their poverty and simplicity, and evidences of deep exploitation and degradation by land-lords and castelords.

He led us to middle class homes where, in hundreds of his sisters he is harassed for fatter dowry, then doused with petrol and set on fire, or stabbed to death, or strangled.

Come, he said, and we followed him to the

prisons of the land where hundreds of undertrials

languish for decades, and petty thieves and the hungry are detained in chains while scam masters and colossal criminals, killers and cheats roam free and climb to peaks of power; where torture is scientifically refined and carefully cultivated; and where innocent youth picked up casually by the police in the evening, turn into mangled and cold corpses by the morning.

Can you see, asks he

how I am in agony everywhere till the end of time?

Where do I live? Come and see, he said, and he took us

to where children are raped and killed,

where girls are trapped in the flesh trade organised skillfully as integral part of modern feudal-capitalist international business;

to where in the carpet industry children work long hours and cough long and die early;

to where families become bonded labour for life and for generations for borrowing a paltry sum of Rs. 200 or less;

to where the masses of the people are kept poor, illiterate and oppressed as cheap or slave labour while all the means of production, all land, capital and tools, are owned and controlled by a thin top social layer of the super-rich;

to where indigenous populations are duped, deprived of land and freedom, and uprooted from soil and culture, and left to wilt and perish; and where they wake up, organize and resist planned oppression;

to where fish-workers toil and sing, and fight the destruction and starvation wrought by the encroachments of the rich who own mechanised boats and political patronage;

to where Dalits struggle to break down walls of deprivation and prejudice which for ages have robbed them of human community and dignity.

Urging us to come and see, Jesus is taking us to every instance of resistance to oppression, into every movement for freedom and equality, and every struggle for dignity and the right to be human, to be creative, to work and eat, to share in the resources of God's earth. He is leading us to where women take a firm stand in favour of life, in favour of abounding life for all, against all laws, traditions, sabbaths and religions that are

insensitive to life (Mk. 3:1-6), or offer death to the weak (Jn. 8:1-11) or shelter shepherds turned thieves, bandits and wolves (Jn. 10:1-18). He asks us to come and see his table-fellowship with outcasts, and the love and reverence with which he washes the feet of his working class disciples, thereby liberating us from distorted and imperialist images of God, and disclosing the depths of the Divine as Pure Truth, total Kenosis and tender For-Otherness. (Jn. 13:1-17; 15:1-17; 17:1-26).

Six

We are on a quest. We seek Him and He seeks us. Where do I meet him?

in mystics like Gitanjali,

in the voice of her pain, in her songs of faith.

in the memory of men like Anthony Murmu and Shankar Guha Niyogi, whom the rulers shot to death because they led the people to defend their life and demand an end to oppression.

in Jayprakash Narain's dream of a beautiful Bharat free of cruelty, corruption and greed, a new Bharat to be fashioned through total revolution, personal and social, and in the life he laid down for this dream.

in the clarity and courage of the women and the men who stand with the Mother of Jesus at the foot of the people's cross in an act of affirming freedom and rejecting the authority of killers.

in the committed resistance of Tribal peoples to the Netarhat Field Firing Range Project, the latest of a series of Adivasi extermination moves which evict, dispossess and displace tens of thousands of indigenous families on the pretext of development, western model, in Jamshedpur 1907, Rourkela 1956, Hatia 1958, Bokaro, Coal Mining areas 1981-85, and at Dam sites in Icha, Chandil, Koel-Karo, Jambir and Baura.

in the courage of the women of the Chipko movement, of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, of the anti-liquor agitation in various parts of the country, and of the literacy campaigns.

We ask, Master, where do you live?

and you bid us come and see,

and touch your wounds in the hands and feet and heart of the wretched of the earth; touch your wounds in their dignity and hope and womanhood and humanhood.

We come and see, and touch and believe and cry,

our Lord, and our God, and we ready ourselves to walk with you the people's way of the cross, the way of blood and struggle which look to the resurrection.